

Written for the newsletter of Sonnenhof, our center for Zen and contemplation in the Black Forest, Germany

October 2015

Dear Friends,

This past week, Pope Francis visited the United States and inspired millions of us with his humble demeanor and stirring words. He spoke movingly of the great challenges facing the world: suffering brought on by global warming, poverty, war, migration, injustice and the marginalization of people. The poor and disenfranchised felt he understood them; several were quoted in the news as saying “he is one of us.” Francis didn’t scold; he urged us to have courage and take on the task of healing suffering in our world with a spirit of respect and love for one another. We know that Francis sometimes says “no”—to same-sex marriage and the ordination of women, for example. But in a country where so much progress is blocked by “naysayers,” his message to us was refreshingly affirmative: be tolerant, accepting, inclusive, generous, and compassionate; use diplomacy rather than confrontation: say “yes.” He reminded us that we are one family, living in one home with responsibility for each other and for our planet.

You are aware of our responsibility, I know, and have taken the lead in the world today in working for peace, living green to protect the environment, and in opening your hearts and homes to the many refugees fleeing poverty and war. You set an example for all of us to try our best, each in our own way, to make the world a better place. And yet, in spite of all our efforts, the daily news may cause us to weep and to feel pessimistic about ever seeing an end to injustice and environmental devastation.

My dharma brother and Sanbō Zen teacher, David Loy, addresses this problem in a recent book, *A New Buddhist Path*. He describes the long and on-going struggle in the West to right what is wrong by transforming injustice in our economic and social structures. And yet, he says, although this has made life fairer and happier in many ways over the centuries, there is still a discrepancy between the ideal and the reality. Human societies have never been able to structure economic and political institutions well enough to avoid their being manipulated by people in those societies. As long as individuals continue to be motivated by what Buddhism calls the “three poisons” of greed, aggression and ignorance, efforts toward social reform will never succeed completely. We also need an inner transformation in each individual for that to happen.

Pope Francis knows that, of course, and he gives people a practice to that end. On the second day of his visit, following his address to the US Congress, Francis went out on a balcony to speak to the tens of thousands of people waiting to see him. He said a few words and closed his short greeting by asking the people to pray for him. Then he added, if there are among you some who don’t believe or can’t pray, please send me good wishes.

Surely the prayers that he asks for wherever he goes are helping Francis to be a wise and loving leader. Yet when he says, “pray for me,” I feel he is not only humbly asking for help to carry out his huge responsibilities but is also trying to *help us* transform inwardly. In order to pray for someone or wish

them well, we have to step beyond the solitary prison of ego-centeredness and open our hearts and minds. And if we do this repeatedly, it changes our minds in a positive way and makes us better and happier people.

There is a clear, down-to-earth book called *Buddha's Brain* about restructuring our brains. It was written by two neuroscientists, Rick Hansen and Richard Mendius, who combine the results of breakthroughs in neuroscience with the insights of thousands of years of contemplative practice. They point out first of all that our brains are hard-wired for sensitivity to negative information. That is because negative experiences generally have the greatest impact on survival. Those of our ancestors who paid a lot of attention to possible threats had a better chance of living long enough to pass on their genes. Consequently the human brain has evolved to register and store negative experiences to a greater degree than the neutral or positive ones that actually make up most of our experience, but which we tend to dwell on less. And our daily news bombards us with the bad things that are happening in the world. In an article in the *New York Times*, columnist Nicholas Kristof says, "We journalists are a bit like vultures, feasting on war, scandal and disaster." Talking about the selection bias in how they report the news, he says, "We cover planes that crash, not planes that take off."

This diet of negative information increases our tendency to see the world as dark. But we can change that, say Hansen and Mendius, by learning how to activate brain states of calm, joy, and compassion instead of worry, sorrow, and anger.

The authors recommend various ways to do this, including some which are very familiar to us. When Pope Francis asks people to pray for him, he is suggesting one. Wisdom traditions have long taught the transformative effect of the repetition of activities such as praying for others and for one's self, sending good wishes and thoughts of loving-kindness, and—probably the most powerful of all—meditating. These are big mind-changers. As we sit in silent contemplation or in zazen, we learn how to be with what arises in us. We see our impulses of greed, fear or aversion and delusion, the fundamental causes of our suffering, and try to accept their presence without indulging them. When we repeatedly see and own these negative thoughts but choose to take refuge in our practice instead, they gradually decrease, as does our suffering, and are replaced by a predominance of calm, joyous, and compassionate states of mind.

The peace we experience ever more clearly in this process of transformation is the peace of resting in our fundamental nature. It is always present and anchors us not only in times of meditation but also when we are buffeted by the pain in our lives. It is there in our vulnerability to the suffering of others and in our "yes" to the work of transforming society. Right in the midst of sorrow and difficulty, we can be anchored in peace. Today more and more people are working on their inner transformation, and this is bringing about a transformed world. We are all peace and clarity by nature. It is the heritage of every being, and, as Yamada Koun Roshi liked to say, the world is inevitably becoming more and more transparent of it. We have to remember this and be grateful for our lives every day.

P.S. Columnist Kristof says that perhaps the most important thing that is happening in the world is almost never covered by journalists: a huge decline in poverty, illiteracy and disease. Most people are

unaware of the statistics and think that the trend is in the opposite direction, but we are living at a time when extreme poverty is retreating, more children than ever, especially girls, are being educated, birthrates are dropping, and diseases are being wiped out. In the U.S. today a big challenge is income inequality, but globally inequality is diminishing because of the rise of poor countries. One development economist feels that these trends will continue even more strongly in the next two decades, becoming the greatest era of progress for the world's poor in human history.