

## **The Zen and Jewish Practice of Healing Suffering**

**Brenda Shoshanna, PhD**

The question of human suffering, its causes and cures, has occupied mankind throughout the generations. To this day, the entire world is filled with suffering and illness of all kinds. Joyful times are often short lived, while periods of strife last longer. The ultimate goal of both Jewish and Zen practice is to heal suffering and create a life of peace, well-being and joy. Although each practice offers somewhat different vantage points, both agree that in order to attain true healing and well-being, it is crucial to first understand the real nature of suffering in whatever form it manifests. What is the root of pain? Once there is true understanding, the steps to cure are not far behind.

When the Buddha was asked who he was he said that he was a physician who had come to cure the ills of the world. We have all been shot with a poison arrow and it was his job to pull the arrow out. What is this arrow? What is the poison the Buddha speaks of? Exactly how have we been shot?

From the Buddha's point of view, there are three poisons that afflict human life—greed, anger and delusion (or ignorance). These afflictions differ in intensity in various individuals and are created by karma, our thoughts, words and actions, in this lifetime and others. Many times, we become sick because we act in sickening ways. Another way of saying this is that the suffering that comes to us, whether through a physical illness, or personal sorrow, comes so that we can learn and grow, it comes to balance us, and help us make new life choices.

Usually when we suffer, we look around for someone to help or save us from what we're going through. During illness, we expect the doctor to take control of the disease and make us well again. But from the Zen point of view this attitude is part of the original disease. Behaving in this manner we relinquish our part in the illness, deny the fact that it has come for a reason. It's up to us to stop, listen and discover the meaning and the lessons it brings. Once we learn the lessons our suffering teaches and make efforts to live from those lessons, a deeper healing takes place in all aspects of our lives.

### **The Jewish Practice of Healing the World: *Tikkun Olam***

Jewish practice is based upon *Tikkun Olam*, this means to heal, balance and correct the world. From the Jewish point of view, as well, when we experience sorrow, loss, and suffering, it is so that we can learn to rectify the difficulty, heal the pain and bring more light to both ourselves and others. Jewish practice focuses upon the fact that world healing cannot take place without each one of us. Even the smallest action, taken at the proper time, in the proper way has a huge effect, not only upon the person who performs it, but upon many others. We are part of a huge, interlinked system and every word we speak, thought we think and action we perform either helps heal the world or tear it down. To think that your life is meaningless and random or that what you do is of no importance is a huge delusion, and a dangerous one, creating an experience of meaninglessness.

From the Jewish point of view, the experience of meaninglessness is the fundamental cause of all suffering. Without knowledge of and a way to connect to God, to our largest purpose in life, we are left without a foundation to stand upon, particularly during times of illness and loss. As we connect with God, with our higher selves or with the deepest meaning of our lives, either through prayer, meditation, contemplation, study, or action, the suffering we are going through begins to subside. The truth of this is particularly heightened during times of illness. When an individual is ill, their ability to deal with their situation is greatly strengthened when they feel there is a larger meaning to why this is taking place, have some way to connect with a greater wisdom and do not see themselves as a helpless victim. This allows them to realize that there is a choice a person can make, when other choices seem to be taken away. They can choose to be an inspiration to others, they can choose to grow and learn during difficult times. Caregivers who put patients in touch with these possibilities are offering a great service.

### **Choose Life**

The ability to choose is a profound human gift. Whatever happens in life is given to us as an opportunity to choose. All day long we are presented with choices which will either lead to growth and joy or to destruction and sorrow. Our very ability to make choices is an integral part of our deepest healing. When we “choose” to be well, to live, to forgive, to enjoy and cherish this day that we now have fully, healing energies come into play. Even if the physical outcome is not one we wish, our spirits grow strong and the manner in which we deal with our illness is greatly enhanced.

In Jewish practice along with prayer, meditation and choosing life, suffering is healed through, study, personal reflection, relationship and joy; by deep thanksgiving and celebrating aspects of life. When we are able to share deeply with others, to open our doors and let those who are hungry come and eat, no matter how we are feeling, healing energies become available. As we nourish others, we are nourished as well.

Participation in life is crucial. No matter what is going on in our lives, it is not useful to wallow in our own private sorrow. Instead we are instructed to stand up, offer ourselves and participate as much as we can. As we do so, we realize that despite our afflictions, we still have a great deal to offer. No matter what we are personally going through, our presence and participation relieves the suffering of others, as well as our own.

### **The Zen Practice of Healing**

Zen offers a different view of illness and suffering. It does not speak about separation from God or others, but separation from ourselves and from truth. We are false to others and to ourselves and live searching for temporary pleasures to numb our pain. Our lives are centered around toys, rather than searching for the real thing. Living in this manner, we are tossed about like puppets thrown about on the waves of change.

Sosan, a great Zen Master, offers a simple and direct medicine to cure suffering; “Do not separate what you like from what you dislike.” Do not choose this or that. Do not

accept what you love and reject what you hate. By dividing the world into good and bad, gain and loss, you are creating duality, discord, pulling life apart.

Usually we spend our precious energy either searching for and clinging to that which we love, and running from, and rejecting that which we hate. In this way, we cling to half of our experience, labeling it as good, and live in fear of losing it. We discard the other half of our experience, labeling it bad, and living in fear of attracting it. Usually when suffering or illness comes, we label it bad and fight it. Living in this manner we are always tense, on guard, and unable to tap into the natural healing energies always available.

The problem becomes further compounded when we identify with external circumstances. When “good” things happen, we then feel proud and worthwhile; when “bad” things happen, we feel as though we’ve failed, or are being punished. Our very sense of who we are becomes dependent upon passing events. When illness comes we feel a sense of personal failure, a desire to reject ourselves and our situation, all of which contribute to suffering.

### **Learning to Live with Change**

An important part of healing is the realization that all experiences change and fluctuate. They cannot do otherwise. This is the law of transiency. Pain and suffering are different. Pain is inherent in many situations, cannot be avoided. But when you fully accept the situation and the pain, when you do not blame yourself or others, you do not turn it into suffering. In order to pull out the poison arrow of suffering, you must learn to stand full square in the center of your experience and taste each moment for what it is.

Zen practice is a great medicine for suffering. Every time you sit in zazen (Zen meditation), you are engaged in healing; you turn around, face the wall, return to yourself and your Source. Then, when you get up from the cushion, you return to everyday activities refreshed. As you do zazen, you heal your pain by entering it, tasting and accepting it one hundred percent. As you do so, you see that pain and healing are simply two sides of one hand. And, the more you accept a moment of experience, the easier it is for it to change and transform. You do not hold it stuck by fighting and resisting it.

When you live in this manner, compassion develops towards everything you encounter and your actions naturally bring benefit and avoid harm. In this process you are constantly cleansed, tested, and taught to live in the fullest and purest way possible. Like a fresh, running brook, your mind and hearts are continually refreshed.

### **The Healing Practice of Kindness**

Much of the sorrow we experience in life comes through others, and healing comes in this way as well. A fundamental way to heal our sorrow is through the practice of kindness. Service and kindness to others heals all. Ultimately, the fruit of both Zen and Jewish practice is kindness. In both practices a person does not *choose* who they will be kind to. Kindness is to be extended to everyone, including those feared or disliked; to enemies, friends, families, acquaintances, animals and even the animals of enemies.

When we look at relationships in this manner, the ways in which we are hurt, disappointed and betrayed by others become the steppingstones for our growth, opportunities to offer kindness in return.

In Jewish practice, there are many specific deeds of kindness which are required. In Zen practice kindness emerges naturally from who we intrinsically are. The kindness is not formulated, but arises spontaneously and is appropriate to the particular moment and situation. However kindness and compassion arise, they are the most potent medicine for healing suffering of all kinds.

## **Healing Exercises**

### **Making Corrections**

What is it in your life that needs healing? Write it down. Write down the ways in which you usually cope with it. Does it work? For today, rather than blame others for your difficulty or sorrow, you might consider how the ways in which you've functioned may have brought this about. What are you doing now to keep the situation going? You may also consider how certain changes in your usual ways would be beneficial, both for this particular situation and your life in general.

### **Celebrating Life**

What brings joy into your life? What are you willing to celebrate totally? Take time to stop your usual activities, thoughts and complaints and celebrate something that is meaningful to you. Dance, sing, play, learn, give gifts, plan surprise. Invite others to share this celebration with you. See how you can make them happy and watch your sorrow drift away.

### **Saying Yes**

Is there a situation you are involved in that is causing unhappiness that you are not able to work out? Today, for a little while, accept the situation entirely as it is. Relinquish your demands about it, your claims that it be different. Try to find something meaningful or positive in the situation; stop fighting and struggling. As you do this, see what happens to your pain. Very often you may also notice that when you stop pushing and pulling, all by themselves, things often begin to change.

### **Practice Zazen**

If you are drawn to practice zazen, this is a good place to begin. Start sitting a little. Do as much as you can. If you are drawn to learn more or sit with others, find a Zen Center near where you live, that you feel comfortable with and join in.

### **Practice Kindness**

Take some time to note the ways in which you are, and are not, kind to others. Also note what you expect back from your acts of kindness. (Realize that if you are expecting something in return, this is not true kindness at all, but a form of barter.) Write this all down. Make a list. Pay attention to what you are noting.

In your daily life, become watchful of the many opportunities that are presented to you to reach out, touch and help. Are you refusing them? Can you accept more each day? Can you view events that come to you as if you are being given an opportunity to help? Be aware of how your feelings of kindness to others fluctuate, and that no matter what you are feeling, you can always choose to engage in actions which are positive, constructive and kind.

As you take your focus off your situation and begin to engage these exercises, a great deal of suffering will dissolve. You will grow strong and be able to deal constructively and lovingly with whatever life presents. At that time, no matter what you are going through, a larger healing will present itself and you will see that it is possible to be joyous and fulfilled even in the most difficult of times.

**Dr. Brenda Shoshanna** is a psychologist and long-term practitioner of both Zen and Judaism. She is the author of award winning, *Jewish Dharma: A Guide to the Practice of Judaism and Zen*, Perseus Books [www.jewishdharma.com](http://www.jewishdharma.com) upon which this article is based. Her radio show *It's a New Day with Dr. Shoshanna*, [www.progressiveradionetwork.com](http://www.progressiveradionetwork.com) (Wed. 2-3). She has offered over 500 talk workshops on all aspects of personal and spiritual growth and developing authentic peace of mind. Some of her books include: *The Anger Diet: 30 days to Stress Free Living, Zen and the Art of Falling in Love* and many others. Contact her at [topspeaker@yahoo.com](mailto:topspeaker@yahoo.com) (212) 288-0028 [www.brendashoshanna.com](http://www.brendashoshanna.com)