

Special focus

BUDDHISM AND WESTERN PSYCHOLOGY

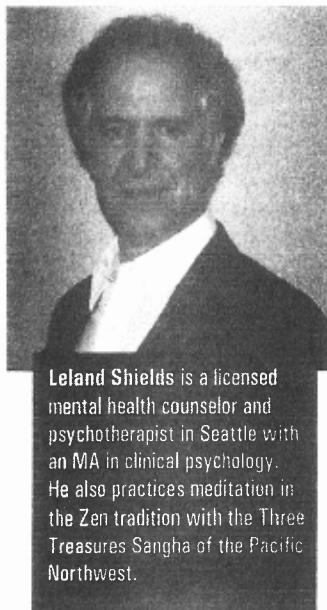


PHOTO: Maya Shields

Leland Shields is a licensed mental health counselor and psychotherapist in Seattle with an MA in clinical psychology. He also practices meditation in the Zen tradition with the Three Treasures Sangha of the Pacific Northwest.

Do you have a story that helps you find another perspective in the midst of suffering?

You can send it to Lee Shields at L.Shields@attglobal.net. If enough stories are submitted, Shields will offer them in a future article.

Finding Freedom in the Midst of Pain

by Leland Shields

As the story goes, the privileged and protected young prince left his palace one day 2500 years ago, and for the first time saw old age, sickness and death. The observations so shook the foundations of his world that he left home to find for himself some resolution to the questions raised by a life that inevitably involves loss, pain and death.

The search has never ceased. Every day, Buddhas of all beliefs – and of none – come through the door of my psychotherapy office seeking some resolution to the meaninglessness they feel and to the despair of escaping inevitable pain and loss. People bring many issues for which there are goal-oriented approaches that can foster change and some relief, but what of the pain that does not abate? What of the pain that derives from a clear view of a hard world? For this, I draw on the questions that brought me to Zen practice, and the stories that viscerally express how we can experience freedom in the heart of this very world.

When invited to write something for the Northwest Dharma News on Buddhist practice and psychotherapy, I thought I'd address the question that has been in the forefront of my mind recently: How do we help each other find freedom in the midst of pain that won't abate?

Envisioning Another Experience

In the midst of pain, it seems that we all sometimes lose sight of another perspective, and without hope of a solution cannot imagine why we would seek something different, let alone how we would do so. There are a couple of stories that have helped me in those moments, and that I find are occasionally meaningful to my clients as well. Allow me the indulgence of telling a koan loosely, as a folk tale might be told. That is, the story is not used only in its intended fashion as a direct expression of an essential experience, but as a means of evoking an intuitive understanding.

A monk said to Tozan, "Cold and heat descend upon us. How can we avoid them?" Tozan said, "Why don't you go where there is no cold or heat?" The monk said, "Where is the place where there is no cold or heat?" Tozan said, "When cold, let it be so cold that it kills you; when hot, let it be so hot that it kills you." (trans. Katsuki Sekida)

In one commentary, Tenkei added, "When it's cold, it's extremely cold, when it's hot, it's extremely hot. Are you cold or hot? Is there anything there?" (trans. Robert Cleary)

Tozan offers an expression of freedom in the midst of whatever circumstance we find ourselves. When sad, we just cry; when amused, we laugh heartily; when in pain, we grimace. This may not immediately seem like any improvement, but it reminds me of a former Yoga teacher of mine. She would lead the class into some convoluted and demanding pose, then gently ask, "Are there any muscles you are using right now that you don't need for the pose?" Of course, I would find that MOST of the muscles I was using were not needed – I didn't need the tension in my face, to hold my shoulders up to my ears, and more. I found this idea to be a widely applicable metaphor of how I would also use emotional and psychic effort. Let me illustrate this further with another story.

If Only We Do Not Choose

When Jack Duffy was first made a Zen teacher in the Diamond Sangha tradition, he was invited to lead a retreat with the Three Treasures Sangha based in Seattle. As Jack's friend and a participant in the event, I drove him to the retreat facility an hour and a half or so away. I don't know whether it would be more difficult to give your first talks and interviews to people you knew and had practiced with for years, or to strangers you would likely never see again, but Jack had

the former to face. All the way there he thought about better ways he could spend the week, how this was really a bad idea, and why didn't we just keep driving? He expressed his nervousness with abandon, leaving me feeling like I was the best man, delivering him to the community. I still remember it as a remarkably comfortable role.

What struck me that day was the simplicity with which Jack held his nervousness. I heard nothing to indicate that he compared himself to an ideal of equanimity. There was nothing pretentious, no attempt to manage his image, no forced composure - he was simply nervous. This emotion, which we would normally categorize as "negative," did not seem to be part of any evaluation in Jack, it was just a fact. Thinking of that day, I am reminded of a line from the sutra Verses on the Faith Mind (Shinjin-Mei), by Sent'zan, "The supreme way is not difficult if only we do not choose." From this clean perspective, we could joke and laugh, commiserate and groan, with a deep ease (easy for me, at least; I wasn't the one on the hook). There is no equanimity that could have moved me more.

All these are stories I use with clients; they are not about me or about the client, or even about Buddhist practice. Stories from far away and long ago suggest the universality of the issues; more current and personal ones are easy to relate to as being about people like us. When helpful, the stories present the humanity of real people as they experience an alternative perspective on a topic at hand. Then the client and I can both talk about how that viewpoint may be available to us, and how we might see ourselves in the story (or not). Buddhist stories in particular, as shown in the examples here, can convey or remind us of "the place where there is no cold or heat," or other perspectives not generally emphasized in our culture.

Let me address two additional ideas. First, at a recent community meeting where this subject arose, a dear friend and long-time Dharma sister talked about the unusually difficult circumstances of her life lately. She reminded us of those times when suffering is enduring, and although she said Tozan's answer may remain the same, after a while the hot and cold become boring. I do not want to dishonor my clients or the reader by making this sound too neat. My Dharma sister is right; suffering (and life) remains a mess, even with our "answers." Second, when I try to express a perspective of "not choosing," I often hear a concern equating acceptance with giving up. What I mean by "not choosing" relates to fully accepting the immutable fact of this moment, and it is still consistent with taking action for improvement in the next moment.

For many, and maybe some of the time for all, "not choosing" eludes us. When sitting in a room with someone in such a place, I find it helpful for me, and for what I can offer, to hold "not choosing." Otherwise, I find I am overly inclined to force a solution or become impatient because of my own discomfort. Thus I find I rely on my own practice, for myself and my client. But the challenge is often to find a way to express this perspective to those whom I am honored to accompany. For this, I find stories help to evoke an image that can allow us to envision another possibility. Then, with some hope, at least a path can be followed.

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