

*An essay by coastsideresident and lay practitioner Dave Barnett
on accepting life as it is given us, even when it is not how we wanted it.*

*An angry man no meaning knows,
No angry man sees the Dhamma,
So wrapped in darkness, as if blind,
Is he whom anger dogs.*

Kodhana Sutta (AN 7.60): The Wretchedness of Anger

Life Is Unfair!

I grew up thinking that everyone should play by the rules: *give credit where credit is due; take responsibility for your mistakes; don't cut in line; don't cheat; don't brag; don't take what's not yours.* They weren't written down anywhere, but they didn't have to be. Everyone knows what the rules are. Life is fair, and if you play by the rules, everything comes out the way it's supposed to.

As I grew older and experienced more of the world, I noticed that people didn't always play by the rules. There are people who take credit for things they didn't do, and blame others for their own mistakes. They aggressively pursue self-promotion and aggrandizement, while tarnishing the reputations of rivals. Some of them bully and intimidate those below them, while flattering those above. They undercut others in order to make themselves look better. I don't like these people.

I believed that if I continued to play by the rules, I would get rewarded, and the cheaters would get caught. What they were doing was so obvious, it was just a matter of time before someone would see through the phoniness and lies, and they would get what they deserved.

Instead, they got promoted, and the unfairness of it all made me angry and kept me up at night.

Stubbornly, I stuck with the rules. I worked to be a better person – meditation, self-improvement seminars, retreats, and following the rules.

One day, I met and became involved with a woman who was the one for me. She was always thinking of others, giving of herself generously, she brought out the best in me. The world was a better place because she was in it. I thought she was a saint. Smart, funny, confident, fearless, and adventurous...she was *right* for me. Finding her was my reward for being a good person and always playing by the rules. We moved in together, we were happy, and I was at peace. This was how my life was meant to be.

I bought a diamond ring, and asked her to marry me. She put the ring on, looked at it sadly, and said she couldn't get married-- there wasn't time. She believed she would die by the time she was 30, and there were still things to do in the two years she had left. I thought this was crazy -- she was in perfect health, and full of life. I was really disappointed, and a little resentful, but I figured we all have our quirks. It's part of being human.

Things started to fall apart with the relationship after that, and she moved out. I tried to convince her that we could work things out, but she was too busy. I was patient. I knew she was the one for me, and sooner or later she'd come around.

About a year later, she called to tell me they found a lump in her breast, and she was waiting for the biopsy results. "Don't tell anyone. You're the only one who knows." Two days later, we found out. "It's malignant... Could you come over?"

In the end, the mastectomies and chemo didn't work, and I knew that there was no God or master plan and the rules were a cruel joke.

I pushed the anger down deep for years. I got on with life, worked hard, got married, kept busy. But I had lost my optimism and trust in the future, and things were not the same. There were no rules anymore, and nothing I did would ever really matter. The

Universe was random. Eventually, I had to make a decision to give up, or find a way out. Earlier experiences with Buddhism called to me, and I took up the practices again.

Bit by bit, I let go of the sadness, and learned to step away from it. Being angry at things that had already happened didn't make them not happen; I couldn't change the past, I could only accept it. Hoping that meditation would release me from the sense of entitlement to fairness, I started attending the Coastside Vipassana sessions at the Montara lighthouse, a few miles from my house.

Once a week, we would sit for about 30 minutes, and then have a dharma talk by a local teacher. I didn't pay too much attention to the talks. I just sat through them to be polite.

One evening, the meditation and talk were led by Buddhist nuns visiting the area. They were nothing like the stern, serious, whack-you-with-a-ruler-if-you-misbehaved Catholic nuns I had grown up around. These nuns were *happy*. They laughed, made jokes about themselves, and didn't miss a thing. This wasn't what I was expecting from bald headed renunciates. They were ...*sparkly*.

One of them led an animated and entertaining discussion of women in Buddhism and what it was like to be a nun. I was thoroughly enjoying this when the nun seated at the far right caught my attention-- because of what she *wasn't* doing. She didn't move around, shift her position, or clear her throat. She was completely still, like a pond in the forest when no breeze was blowing, no ripples or disturbance marring the perfect reflection of the surface. I watched closely. She was fully present and engaged, but at the same time, serene and totally at peace. I wondered if I could ever have that.

I started paying more attention to the talks, and tried to understand what they meant. When I first heard about taking refuge in the Buddha, I thought this meant praying to the Buddha to destroy evil. (I was raised Catholic, and was taught that sinners were punished.) Then I discovered that taking refuge was more like getting under shelter during the monsoon season. It was still wet and miserable outside, but the shelter protected us from the rain. I discovered that taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha was not a ritual, but a strategy.

I continued to attend the Wednesday night talks. I discovered the Dharma Seed and Audio Dharma websites, loaded up my iPod with talks, and listened to them whenever I could. I discovered the Pali Canon, and things started to connect and make sense. The Dharma talks are not sermons, they are tools. The Eight Fold Noble Path is not a catechism, it's a roadmap. The Five Precepts are not commandments, they are guides to liberation.

I'm a practical person. If it works, I use it. I discovered that dwelling in destructive emotions damages me, and leads to bad outcomes. The more I practiced *metta*, *karuna*, and *mudita*, the easier it became to accept what was given. Even extending a little compassion towards those I disliked changed my outlook. My anger, resentment and contempt dissipated, and injustices no longer mattered very much. Things are the way they are, so don't waste time and energy trying to change things that don't change.

Hindrances arise. I feel anger, restlessness, and doubt come up. So, I do as they tell us for mediation – I note it. I feel anger coming on, and I say “oh, I'm getting angry” – and that usually stops the anger in its tracks, or least slows it down. The antidotes really work.

There was once a Samurai, named Nobuchika, who approached the Zen master Hakuin, and asked whether there were really Hell and Heaven. The Zen master asked him, “Who are you?” The Samurai answered, “I am a Samurai, sir”. “Uh! Are you?” the master exclaimed, and said, “You don't look like a Samurai; you look like a beggar”. The Samurai got angry and grabbed his sword. When Master Hakuin saw that, he said, “Ha! You have a sword. It looks very dull and useless. What can you do with that dull sword?” Nobuchika drew his sword out of the sheath. Then Master Hakuin said, softly, “See! The gate of Hell opens now”. When Nobuchika heard that, he stopped, and put his sword back in its sheath. Master Haku-in said, kindly, “The gate of Heaven opens now”.

I used to spend a lot of energy getting stressed out over things that might or might not happen. When something unfair happened, I would replay it in my head for days, building up the resentment. I was angry when life wasn't fair and when cheaters won.

Now, I just let these things go. When a series of unfortunate events occurs, I look at it like a situation comedy and laugh. Life has become much easier now that I realize it is as it is.

Last year, the company I worked for was acquired, and I was laid off.

In 1688, Masahide's house and business burned, and he wrote:

Barn's burnt down

Now

I can see the moon.

Got it.

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