

# Fall Newsletter

**September 2008**

## **Grist for the Mill**

According to the Buddha, we can evaluate the quality of a society by observing the way in which its most vulnerable citizens are treated.

If this is indeed an accurate determinant of our society's well being, we are in trouble! So, how exactly do we treat those who are most vulnerable? Say -- women, the elderly, children and those who have made mistakes and are serving time in prisons?

How is it that most yoga practitioners in this country are women, yet the most successful, renowned yoga icons are mostly men?

How about all the unpaid work that women do raising children and keeping house?

And how are our children doing? Children in middle class and poor families are getting less and less of a chance at having a decent education these days. Children whose parents are forced to hold down three jobs in order to make ends meet (a fact that President Bush seemed quite proud of in one of his speeches), are suffering from inadequate care at home.

Other vulnerable populations in our society include: the elderly, who are conveniently tucked away in old-folks' homes; and today's enormous prisoner population -- who, once released, end up all too often back in prison. In part, this is due to the lack of opportunities for rehabilitation that would enable them to lead a normal life.

Perhaps looking at how we deal with our personal vulnerability and weaknesses can shed light on how our society got itself into such a mess.

Mainstream society teaches us to hide our weaknesses and our vulnerability. Consequently, we have learned to spend our time and energy hiding, fighting or fixing these aspects of ourselves. When faced with our personal weaknesses, we find that, as in society, we are unprepared to manage what we have inside of us. We judge and treat our vulnerability viciously.

The Dalai Lama noticed this trend when he first began teaching how to cultivate loving kindness in the West. A practice that traditionally begins with feeling loving kindness for ourselves first, His Holiness was shocked by how many of us Westerners are judgmental and loathsome of ourselves.

Thankfully, there is a remedy to this! Yoga and related practices promote a different approach to managing these universally shared aspects of being human. Through Yoga, we can realize that our weaknesses are in fact a means to a deeper connection

to ourselves and also to each other. Once we find ourselves walking on this path, we learn to recognize our vulnerability and weaknesses as grist for the mill.

I propose embarking upon an exploration of the tendency to deal with ourselves so harshly. We begin by asking questions of ourselves, and answering them honestly. What is our habitual way of dealing with our weaknesses? Is our main strategy to hide them? Fight them? Fix them?

In our yoga or meditation practice, we can start to pay attention to what happens when we encounter our weaknesses. When we sit the body down in meditation, or start to mindfully breathe into our body while moving, those weaknesses will show themselves quite quickly. Instantaneously, the body will respond based on how we have conditioned ourselves to hide, fight or fix.

Instead of expending so much of our energy in this way, we could just make space for their presence. In doing so, what becomes apparent is that in each weakness is also a hidden gem, waiting to be uncovered.

As an example, I would like to use myself. When I was younger, I was somewhat of an arrogant yoga teacher. Coming from a background in dance, the advanced yoga poses came relatively easy to me and because of this, I had little compassion for stiff and slow students.

Later, I suffered a number of injuries. Initially I viewed these as a bother and an obstacle to “true yoga,” a weakness of which I was ashamed. Finally, I accepted them, and listened to the message these injuries were bringing to me. The hidden gem was revealed: Humility, compassion and a deep connection with all those who suffer. I also became somewhat of an expert in all kinds of physical injuries, since I had journeyed through most myself. Often our weaknesses are blessings in disguise, ideally leading us to tenderness, wisdom and compassion.

Another insight into this occurred for me many years ago during a weeklong activist camp with Julia Butterfly Hill. She gave a talk. As she came to a particular place in her story, she started to cry.

I immediately felt uncomfortable. There she was, exposing her vulnerability in public. I expected her to be embarrassed, maybe even pull away or stop talking. None of this happened -- in fact, quite the opposite. Her message became clearer and stronger. She remarked that she always had to cry when coming to this point in her story, leaving me with the impression that this was a powerful person with a message who was unafraid to share everything, including her tears, to communicate that she really CARED!

This experience changed me. I realized that caring, which often causes our emotional vulnerability to arise, is a form of strength and not weakness. I also learned that when we reveal our caring, vulnerable selves to each other, we fuel our message. Imagine that as a society, we translated our vulnerability and weaknesses as strength and power, and used these new definitions to protect what is good, and, to step up, making even more good in our lives and therefore in our communities.

In the upcoming immersion that I will co-teach with my dear friend, Madhuri Martin, at Yoga Kula in Berkeley, it is my intention to create a safe environment in which my students can explore these very things. It is such a delight to watch people transform vis-à-vis access to the ancient teachings of Yoga and the Dharma, in tandem with receiving the loving support of a community that is learning together to use the incredible tools offered by the Yogic tradition.

I am excited to co-facilitate and witness another powerful group get in touch with who they really want to be!

If you are interested in joining, please read the information below. There is one non-negotiable requirement -- that is, I am asking for each individual's full commitment!