

Order of Service
De-Stress Kit
May 23, 2010

Meditation & Prayer

Voice still and small,
Deep inside all,
I hear you call...
In storm and rain,
Sorrow and pain,
Still we'll remain...
Calming my fears,
Quenching my tears,
Through all the years...

Silence.

Amen.

Reading "Kisagotami," Buddhist story

Once there was a woman named Kisagotami, whose first-born son died. She was so stricken with grief that she roamed the streets carrying the dead body and asking for help to bring her son back to life. A kind and wise man took her to the Buddha.

The Buddha told her, "Fetch me a handful of mustard seeds and I will bring your child back to life." Joyfully Kisagotami started off to get them. Then the Buddha added, "But the seeds must come from a family that has not known death."

Kisagotami went from door to door in the whole village asking for the mustard seeds, but everyone said, "Oh, there have been many deaths here", "I lost my father", "I lost my sister". She could not find a single household that had not been

visited by death. Finally Kisagotami returned to the Buddha and said, "There is death in every family. Everyone dies. Now I understand your teaching."

The Buddha said, "No one can escape change, death and unhappiness. If people expect only happiness in life, they will be disappointed."

Sermon *De-Stress Kit*

Rev. Bruce Davis (1957)

There is no question that suffering is part of our lives. Suffering is the pain that we bear, physically, psychologically, and spiritually, but it's more than the pain alone. It's our strong and natural desire to live without the pain. It's our opinion about the pain, that it hurts and that we want no more of it. Whether suffering hits us from time to time, or becomes part of the complex pattern of our every day, few of us ever escape its grasp. It is the first noble truth of Buddhism: suffering happens.

We naturally seek relief from suffering. After years of struggling with the cycle of pain, relief, pain again, and relief again, we naturally seek freedom from the grip of this cycle. Buddha declared that we can find that freedom. It is a journey that begins by understanding the origins of suffering.

Buddha's second noble truth is usually talked about in terms of change in our lives. No matter how solid, how trustworthy, or how seemingly permanent may appear our relationships, jobs, homes, and possessions, their transience is demonstrated to us ever again. A close friend or family member suddenly dies. After working at a trusted job for thirty years, we are let go. In an unprecedented recession, we find that our retirement investments have withered dramatically. Where we hope for the permanent, impermanence ever disappoints our longing.

But the second noble truth speaks of more than just the transience of all that we desire to hold as permanent. Suffering doesn't emerge from the *losses themselves*, but rather arises in the *desire we have to prevent those losses*. If I am very attached to a parent, and she dies, I will suffer profound grief. If I depend upon my job for my life and my family's life, I will suffer profound fear for our future. The second noble truth is therefore about *attachment*—the illusion that we can hold as permanent all that is transitory.

I'm reminded here of Mary Oliver's poignant verse:

To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

Every time we lose something desired or dear, we feel that pull at the heartstrings. The emotional reality of this pain becomes familiar in the passing decades of a life. What we are less familiar with is the physiology. Every time we encounter disappointment and transition in our lives, a cascade of physiological events take place within our body. Epinephrine or adrenaline is secreted by the adrenal gland, causing the blood pressure to rise, the pulse to become rapid, the muscles to become tight, the mind to be hyper-alert, and the digestion to shut down. Platelets in the blood stream get sticky, in preparation for clotting, should the perceived attack lead to a physical wound. This cascade of self-protective events is called the fight or flight response.

Yes, this response was designed for self-protection. But that was in the era of the saber-tooth tiger. The fight or flight mechanism helps only with actual physical distress, when we are meant to fight our adversary or, often the better part of valor, to run like hell. But we live in a world in which the changes we face do not usually require the help of the fight or flight response. If your boss comes in and says your job is on the line, or your spouse confronts you saying your marriage is on the line, the natural physiological reaction is more likely to hurt you than help: high blood pressure, clots causing stroke or heart attack, tight muscles leading to skeletal pain, anxiety, exhaustion, and depression, to name just a few of the maladies of a fight or flight mechanism gone bezonkers.

The word “stress” has come to have a technical meaning in the medical literature, especially based on the work of Dr. Hans Selye. Selye defined stress as a “general adaptation

syndrome” that caused profound changes in the body’s chemistry, leading to a host of illnesses.

This syndrome is characterized by three phases:

- First is the “Alarm Stage.” Here we recognize the danger and our body begins to prepare for it. During this phase the main stress hormones cortisol, adrenaline, and noradrenaline, is released to provide instant energy. If this energy is repeatedly not used by physical activity, it can become harmful to the body.
- Second comes the “Resistance Stage.” The body begins restoring balance and a period of recovery for repair and renewal takes place. But if a stressful condition persists, your body loses its ability to resist and remains in a state of arousal.
- Finally there is the “Exhaustion Stage.” At this phase, the stress has continued for some time. Stress levels go up and stay up until there’s no energy left to deal with it. Physically we are exhausted all the time. Thinking and memory become impaired, with tendency toward anxiety and depression. (200)

In Buddhism the examples of suffering are usually stressful events of a negative nature. Kisagotami in our reading loses her child and is cast into the depths of suffering. And yet, stress is not only the bad things. Any experience of life change, *good or bad*, creates the same cascade of stressful physiological events. In this sense, the attachment or comfort that is destroyed by the life transitions is to the status quo itself. As stressful as it may be to continue on in a bad job, you may ultimately have to deal with greater stress to quit or be fired. And, surely, there are times in our lives that we do choose the greater stress for the greater good.

Stress researcher Dr. Hans Selye was well aware of this phenomenon. Those perceived negative events in a life were termed “distress,” and the positive life changes are called “eustress.” Though we may prefer the positive transitions over the negative ones, they both are equally stressful. They both cause the fight or flight changes to take place. Though we may say that the negative changes trigger our anxiety and that the positive changes trigger our excitement, both anxiety and excitement are mediated by the same fight or flight response.

So, what do we do? Hide in a cave? Retire to a monastery? Avoid life changes at all costs? Of course not. Our lives are meant for the living. And Buddha made it clear that no matter how hard you try to hide from it, transience and impermanence will always find you. So we have to get better at dealing with the inevitable stress.

Here's a five-part stress tool kit for your consideration. Unlike a snake-bite kit, it's not to be stored away in your first-aid supplies. It's to be used many times each and every day.

1. Some stress just happens, some we choose ourselves. We can't always avoid the changes that come our way unbidden, but we can monitor the changes we choose. Ideally, choose those changes in your life that are meaningful to you, and let those opportunities pass that mean less. If you take on every possible change that presents itself to you, the stress will always be very high. Do you really need that boat or that vacation house? Maybe not, maybe so. Just be clear with yourself.

Dr. Thomas Holmes, a University of Washington stress researcher, indicated that some stresses are greater than others. He developed a point system for the distress and eustress in our lives. For example, divorce has an impact of 73 stress points in a person's life, while marriage has an impact of 50 points. If you are fired from your job that's a distress totaling 47 stress points. Yet, if you finally and happily retire, that's a eustress totaling 45 points. Holmes suggests that you be careful to spread these points out over time, so that your stress adaptation system can stay on top of them. Don't for example, divorce, remarry, and retire all in the same month. Spread it out.

2. For the second tool in your stress kit I offer you the cover of the order of service today. It's one of my life-long stress antidotes—sitting in the dune grass at sunset. What I experience is peace and calm. What I know is happening in my body is a physiological response equal in power but opposite from the fight or flight response, termed the relaxation response by Harvard cardiologist, Dr. Herbert Benson. Where do you go for peace and calm, and how often do you get there? These words from poet Wendell Berry are often with me:

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought

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of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

3. No stress kit is complete without the tool of regular exercise. It comes up again and again in the medical literature as one of the best things you can do to counter the effects of stress on body and mind. For one thing the exercise itself produces hormones like endorphins that reverse the impact of the fight or flight response. For me the key here is to exercise in a way that is relaxing. If it becomes too competitive or if you do something that you don't enjoy, the exercise can itself become a stress. I once asked a UU minister, a candidate for a job in our area, what his spiritual practices were. Right off, without question, he said jogging.
4. When I one time worked in a very stressful environment, I would nurse cups of coffee all day long. Though the caffeine directly increased the fight or flight mechanism, depleting me of needed energy, it felt good in the environment of stress. There are lots of toxic substances that we take in the context of our stressful lives that impede our success in dealing with stress. Alcohol and nicotine have become more or less acceptable responses to stress, as unhealthy as they are. Over eating similarly is a stress response that feels good in the moment but may lead to severe health consequences over time. Indeed, many of the behaviors that we call addictions, from drugs to sex, are in the context of our dependency upon stressful lives. The tool here? Cut out the toxics or reduce the frequency and amount of their use. And if addiction is there, find help to begin a lifetime of recovery.
5. I feel I must include meditation in this anti-stress kit. Meditation is, however, not just one practice. It can be defined as any practice that causes the mind to settle down into a deeply restful but alert state and the physiology to shift into the relaxation response. I don't care if the origin of the practice is hypnosis, Buddhist chanting, Christian contemplative prayer or mantra meditation. If it brings you into that place of silence and stillness within and if it calms and gentles this anxious body, then that's what I'm talking about. Something remarkable happens with meditation over the years. It's what

Buddha was referring to as non-attachment, what Mary Oliver described as “letting go.” As fully as we embrace and enjoy our life, our people, our work, or whatever, over time meditation begins to prepare us for the inevitable time when those we love leave, or when we ourselves must leave. Instead of trying to control life’s outcomes, some persons come to a point of realization in which they allow the impermanence also to be a valued part of their life. This is when stress management rises to become enlightenment.

I invite you to a new relationship with stress in your life. Have fun. Take care. And be gentle with yourself. This is spiritual practice.

Amen.