

Unconditional Acceptance

An Interview with Joanne Friday

Joanne Friday is a Dharma Teacher in the Order of Interbeing. In 2003, she received authority to teach from Thich Nhat Hanh, her teacher for twenty years.

Joanne leads meditation retreats for Sanghas and groups throughout the Northeastern U.S. She lives in Rhode Island, where she is the guiding teacher for the six Sanghas that comprise the Rhode Island Community of Mindfulness. She is also an Associate Chaplain at the University of Rhode Island.

Joanne was interviewed by Natascha Bruckner on October 11, 2012.

MB: Would you be willing to give an example from your own life of how you have used the practice to get free?

JF: Probably the most profound example was getting a diagnosis of cancer. My mother was dying at the time and she had been in the hospital. I had just signed her over into hospice care, and I went downstairs to the waiting room and got a call saying I had cancer. I remember feeling as if ice water were running over my body. Real fear. But within a minute, I breathed, I sent metta to myself, and then the question came to my mind: "Are you sure?"

As soon as I asked the question, I felt peace, because I realized, "I have no idea. It could be almost nothing; it could be death. I don't know." So for me to get all wound up about it would really not make sense. I realized, "I need to find out, and that's it. And right now, I need to be present for my mother in the hospital."

The first thing was breathing. The breath was right there as the default position. The second was metta. I have practiced metta for twenty years, so it was right there. And then to ask, "Are you sure?" That takes me right to nonattachment to view and "don't know mind." And in "don't know mind," there's every possibility. It's such a wonderful place.

And then I thought, "Wow, I've been practicing the Five Remembrances* for years." I have been aware of impermanence, but never as aware as when I got that phone call. The next thing that came to mind was: "If you have limited minutes to be on the planet"—later I thought it was really comical to think in terms of "if" —"how many of them do you want to spend in fear and speculation?" And the answer was, "Zero."

So that, to me, is a clear and concise example of how the practice can be applied in daily life. And the most beautiful thing to me was, going through a year of cancer treatment, I probably didn't spend more than maybe a half an hour in the entire year in fear and speculation. I told my husband, "You know, the real tragedy wouldn't be to die of cancer; to me, the real tragedy would be to have wasted this time." To not have enjoyed the time I did have.

MB: That is an incredible example. Thank you. You used all these potent tools one after the other in a very short period of time.

JF: I can usually only see progress in my practice by noticing that I am responding very differently to a situation than I would have reacted ten years earlier. In this instance, I would have been completely tied up in knots; I would have been a nervous wreck. I would have been trying to figure out what was going to happen and completely caught in fear and speculation. I know that my mind had been trained in that way.

But the training in gentle diligence, paying attention in everyday life, and taking good care of strong emotions when they come up really paid off. When attachment to views arose, it was such a gift to be able to look clearly, to not get caught in the surface of things. And to just do that over and over and over and over and over and over. If we practice like that, when the going gets tough, the practice is there for us.

MB: That's a beautiful example of how we can train our minds without effort, without stress.

JF: We don't have to create a war with ourselves. There doesn't have to be any judgment, criticism, any of that. It's just to notice, and to do the practice, then to notice. To strengthen our mindfulness and concentration.

MB: In the book *Reconciliation: Healing the Inner Child*, you tell a wonderful story of transforming your anger to compassion by connecting with your inner three-year-old. Do you connect with your inner child on a regular basis? What have you found helpful in keeping her nourished and happy?

JF: When I went to my first retreat, I signed up for a consultation with Thay Phap An [a senior Plum Village monk, now Director of the European Institute of Applied Buddhism in Germany]. I was brain-injured from a car accident and I was in a state of real confusion. I wanted to talk about a woman who had been very angry with me, so I said, "There's this woman, she's a really angry person." And he said, "That's not correct." He said that whenever we assign a label to anyone or anything, it's incorrect, because everything is impermanent. So we're assigning a permanent status to something that is inherently impermanent. That has been a wonderful teaching; I use it all the time.

I've been doing the practice of healing the inner child ever since. There's hardly been a day that I haven't used it, in one way or another. When I'm experiencing a strong emotion, I simply notice and embrace that feeling, breathe with it, and hold it. For me, just being with that feeling will usually bring a memory back of another time and place. It might have been last week or it might have been when I was three.

It inevitably takes me to times and places when I needed love and compassion and I didn't get it. So my job is to provide that for myself. I can show that child a lot of love and compassion. My main goal in the practice is to bring the child into the present moment, to let her know the good news that she is no longer three. We're adults now, and if people are yelling, we can leave. We don't have to be there.

Many people do not access memories from the past when they embrace difficult emotions. If that is the case, you can breathe and send metta to yourself in the present because that child is still alive inside of you. A lot of healing can happen by doing this practice—accepting what is in the present moment and accepting ourselves unconditionally.

MB: What experiences in your own life have been most valuable in serving you as a Dharma teacher?

JF: I would say suffering. There's nothing quite like it to help us to wake up. Thay says that he wouldn't want a nirvana without suffering, and I can see why. The brain injury from a car accident is what brought me to the path, so suffering got me here. I look back at any suffering I've had in my life and ask: "What did it have to teach me? Did I benefit? Did I make good use of it?" If I didn't make good use of the suffering, then it's a waste of time.

* The Five Remembrances:

I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old.

I am of the nature to have ill health. There is no way to escape ill health.

I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.

All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.

My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground upon which I stand.