

Hi to my Winter Feast buddies,

How are you doing with the activities? It is a huge challenge, I know. Each day I have to bring myself to my meditation. And as you know, I don't always succeed. However, I am happy to report that since the last time I wrote you twelve days ago, I have managed to meditate 11 days, sometimes even twice! Yeah!

Lately I have been thinking about gratitude. You know, so often I have heard people say that one of the greatest spiritual practices is gratitude – and along with that, they say, we can be grateful that we are alive – every day is precious.

Now, I have a very negative side to me – and when I hear that, it kicks in. I find myself thinking, "You've got to be kidding! Grateful for life? How can I possibly be grateful for life when life is such a mess? I mean, all it takes is a simple look around to see the cruelty, the stupidity, the senselessness of it all!"

I can imagine that living in prison, you may be having a similar reaction to the idea of being grateful for life itself. Maybe you have thoughts like, "I'll be grateful for life when I get the hell out of here! Give me my freedom; then I'll be grateful. Let that guard die a slow, painful death; maybe then I'll be grateful! That judge who sentenced me – how about giving him a lengthy prison term in a supermax prison – yeah! Then I can think about being grateful!" Of course, we know that if those things happened, it is not actually gratitude we would feel, but rather a sense of justice – like our own experience of being victimized is being avenged.

I often wonder, "How can I make peace with the pain and suffering I see happening all around me in the world? How can I be grateful for life when I see us humans destroying the planet that supports us, when I witness the cruelties we inflict on each other, when I am aware of the incredibly difficult lives some people live?"

When I asked my spiritual teacher this question, he started by saying, "The world is sacred; it doesn't need to be improved."

He told me pain is something we need to go through in order to learn something and open a deeper part of ourselves that is willing to embrace pain. He reminded me that people who do great work are the ones who are prepared to burn, burn, burn and burn if it's necessary. To become a great healer, you need to pass this test. You cannot put your head into the sand and say, 'I don't want this.' Those who pass this test expand their energy, their awareness and their presence into a bigger radius."

He went on to say that we have a tendency to contract away from pain – to put our heads in the sand and say, 'It's too painful.' When we say this, we are resisting our own pain and the pain of the world. So the first step in making peace with pain is to feel the intensity of it. That means we cannot numb out to it through the use of drugs, entertainment, sexual activity, eating, television, being mindless in any way. We need to develop a new relationship with pain – drop into it and say, 'This is what I experienced. This is how the world is made.' Then ask yourself, 'What kind of relation can I find to pain that calls me into my deeper calling of giving and caring?'

Every story I have heard about people who have had amazing breakthroughs in consciousness has involved them going through some very difficult life experiences. This is often referred to as the 'dark night of the soul' because they felt very confronted by the darkness of the world, which is also the unconscious part of the world. It is not an easy journey, but it is not written that our lives should be easy. Our lives are what they are, and our job is to find our relationship to our life.

Thomas suggested that I learn to stay and relax into the sensations I feel; not label them but learn to embrace them. To expand my own energy so I can see the world more clearly. He left me with the homework of living with the sentence he gave me at the beginning: **'The world is sacred; it does not need to be improved.'** He went on to say, "That doesn't mean the world doesn't develop. While the world is sacred, it's still developing. The idea of [needing to improve the world] is an interesting one."

So I have been living into this idea of the world being sacred and not needing to be improved. I have not yet moved to a high enough level of consciousness to have integrated that into my being. But I am finding it to be an interesting and empowering inquiry.

Being in prison, you know only too well from firsthand experience, the pain associated with that life. And we have been taught from an early age, in all sorts of ways, that pain is bad; it is best to try to avoid it or make it go away. Think of all the messages you got about this – advertisements for all kinds of pain killers, cold remedies; just stay busy and don't think about whatever is troubling you; if someone hits you, hit back.

Many of us have also been given the message of 'no pain, no gain.' This is a kind of grin and bear it way of looking at pain. Or you must deserve it because you have done something wrong, and pain is a way of making sure you don't do that again. So in all these ways, we are trying to push down or push away the pain. In none of these ways of dealing with pain are we taught to just simply relax into and feel the pain without judging it, labeling it, or trying to do anything with it.

I invite you over these next ten days to consider a radical new way of being with pain and painful experiences. Practice staying with and relaxing into the sensations you feel – not labeling them, just experiencing them. And then notice what, if anything, changes in your relationship to the pain.

When I try to relax into the pain, I notice great discomfort – sometimes fear emerges, other times anger arises, and at times sadness. Those, too, I am practicing being with. Not having to push away any of my feelings – just learning to be with whatever is.

When I attended the Vipassana meditation retreat last summer, they had us notice over and over again how feelings arise and pass away, arise and pass away. And they invited us to not grasp onto the pleasant feelings or turn away from the unpleasant ones. The word they used a lot was equanimity – remaining calm and centered, simply witnessing the feelings as they move through our awareness. An interesting practice, indeed.

Challenging work for sure. Are you up for it?

Let us know your thoughts on this and how it is for you, should you decide to take it on.

Much metta,
Maya