

Ron Erlandson's Statement To His Friends

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One afternoon while I was still a young priest, I was introduced to a man who was living with cancer. Taking me aside, he said, "If anyone ever tells you he's going to beat something like this, you can tell them **it isn't necessary.**" He said that taking a combative stance toward cancer, or any serious disease, is inconsistent with following a spiritual path. **This message has remained with me over all these years.**

In 2003, I was catapulted into my own mortality. My doctor told me I had aggressive prostate cancer. Suddenly, there was a surrealistic air about the room. Dressed in his white jacket, the doctor appeared to flow into the stark whiteness of the wall behind him, and now it seemed like the wall itself was speaking. "Are you hearing me?" he asked. I struggled to listen through my fear and distress.

At home, I called a close friend, Gail (not her real name): "I've just found out I have aggressive prostate cancer." Without leaving any space, she exclaimed, "Ron, you're going to be OK". As she continued her reassurances, I felt more and more isolated. "How does she know I'll be OK? After all, the doctor doesn't even know that." Somehow it seemed she could not be OK, now that I wasn't OK. Did it mean that she could only be OK with me, if I was OK?

Three years later, in Vroman's Bookstore, **a book jumped off the shelf that led to a new dimension of my Spiritual Path** - the book titled "When Things Fall Apart," written by Pema Chodron, a 72 year old former Roman Catholic. She is now a Buddhist nun, spiritual director of Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, the author of many books, and has appeared several times with Bill Moyers. She is one of the foremost students of Chogyam Trungpa, a revered Tibetan meditation master and author of many books on Buddhism and the path of meditation.

In 1970, he moved to the U.S., settling in Boulder, Co. He was a dynamic teacher, establishing meditation centers around the world. **In 1976, inspired by the ancient Asian Shambhala vision of enlightened society and spiritual warriorship**, he developed a series of contemplative workshops called Shambhala Training - non denominational and open to people of all persuasions. Besides learning meditation, Shambhala Training deepens ones relationship with the total environment, **helping the student to experience their**

embeddedness in the always present Sacred World, and the ever present opportunities for practicing loving kindness to self and others.

Shambhala Training is designed to awaken to ones true nature, as described either by Buddhism or Christianity. Chogyam Trungpa calls the Shambhala journey, “The Sacred Path of the Warrior,” to emphasize its counter-culture quality, its approach to conquering this world, **not through violence or aggression, but through gentleness, courage and self-knowledge.**

Now, before saying more, Yes, I’m aware of the controversy about the bishop-elect of Northern Michigan. **Some of you may wonder if I’m on a slippery slope.** If the Michigan priest’s experience has any parallel to my own, it has only deepened his Christian faith. No one has pressured me to take Buddhist vows. I have no intent to take vows which would place me in denial of my Christian roots. [BTW, Ron requested and received Buddhist Refuge Vows about three months ago.]

During Shambhala Training, I learned the ancient Buddhist practice of Tonglen. **This profound practice has changed my life.** In contrast with meditation, it actively uses concepts, images and emotions to develop compassion for oneself and others. It has a universality that for me is the secret heart and meeting place of Buddhism and Christianity. It helps connect us with our suffering, rather than attempting to fight it or to escape it. Paradoxically, **this dissolves the armor around our heart and awakens us to the compassion that has always already been there.** Tonglen cuts through our habitual patterns of spinning a cocoon to defend against past hurts and future anxieties.

This practice begins by breathing in someone’s suffering. First you breathe in the person’s pain, fear, greed, hate, denial, whatever. As you breathe out, you send out whatever you imagine would mitigate their pain.

As you can see, Tonglen goes against the grain of how we usually hold ourselves together. It goes against the grain of wanting life on our own terms. It cuts the habitual reaction of trying to beat obstacles rather than first giving them space, getting a fresh perspective. It goes against our efforts to keep our mortality under wraps. It enables us to let go of self-centeredness - the ME PLAN - which is the source of all our suffering. **Connecting to the**

vast, open dimension of our being that Buddhists call “shunyata” and Christians call the Kingdom of God, we find that painful things are no longer a big deal, nor are they as solid as they first appeared.

Now, 6½ years later in a different doctor’s office, I sit among a motley group of those sharing membership in a club to which none of us aspired. I breathe in my suffering and theirs, and breathe out peace and compassion to all of us. I notice how embracing my cancer, rather than fighting it, has brought new meaning to my life. I feel a strong communion with all beings. I have no need to be OK, in the sense my friend Gail had meant.

A few months ago, my oncologist reminded me that the hormonal therapy can’t fool the cancer indefinitely. “Nor,” said I, “can one fool oneself forever.” Sir Thomas Moore said before his beheading, “We are all in the same cart going to an execution.” So how can I hate anyone or wish anyone harm? To feel the full force of our mortality, is to recognize we’re in the same cart, and to experience our interbeing with all humanity. From this can arise a determination to help alleviate all suffering... **even to consider others as more important than our cherished self.**

One modern figure who dedicated her life to alleviating suffering was Mother Theresa.

There’s no more inspiring statement of the spiritual essence of Tonglen practice than these familiar words of hers: (editor added [three words] in last line)

“We all long for heaven where God is, but we have it in our power to be in heaven with him at this very moment, but being happy with him now means:

Loving as he loves

Helping as he helps

Giving as he gives

Serving as he serves

Rescuing as he rescues

Being with him 24 hours

Touching him [NOW] in [whatever is] his distressing disguise.

The end....