

Surfing the Waves of Life with Ease

How often do you become irritated or anxious as you go through your day? I do hope that at least some of your days this October will be really peaceful and relaxing or even fun and exciting. But if you are anything like me, the minute something goes wrong with your day, you feel sensations of anxiety or irritation rising up within you. Then what happens? Well again, reflecting on my own experience, when I become anxious or irritated, I often hear a voice in my head telling me off for thinking negative thoughts or being unable to rise above negative sensations in my body such as a clenching in my jaw when I am irritated or a fluttering in my solar plexus when I get anxious.

This negative voice in my head seems to be determined to make me feel guilty for being a perfectly normal human being! This voice wants me to feel bad about something over which I have no real control – the rising up of one wave after another of anxiety or irritation as I go through my daily life. The nature of this negative voice was really brought home to me last week whilst I was in Assisi with a dear old friend from my university days.

Assisi was as amazing and as uplifting as ever. However, my dear friend irritated me from time to time, or rather, I felt irritated by her. Of course, she was not trying to press my buttons. She is far too nice and kind to do anything like that. But we were definitely on different wavelengths and as she did not seem to want to go off to explore Assisi by herself, we ended up spending a lot of time together.

Now the good news about this story is that getting irritated in Assisi whilst my consciousness was pretty high due to the amazing spiritual energy there, really helped me to see that whenever we get irritated or anxious, nothing is fundamentally wrong with us and there is absolutely no reason to feel guilty about any of our feelings.

Whenever we feel anxious or irritated, our pre-programmed brain is just automatically responding to any kind of threat that it perceives in the environment around it. Moreover, the normal human mind is not only biologically primed to be on the alert for any kind of danger, it has also been heavily programmed by negative events in the early years of our lives. This negative programming means that our 'pain body' can be easily triggered when someone inadvertently pushes our buttons – just as my dear friend did in Assisi.

So what to do? Well first and foremost, we need to be really kind and compassionate to ourselves when any kind of anger or fear –mild or strong – begins to whoosh through our system. We then need to pause when we begin to feel anxious or irritated, take a few deep calming breaths, and gently say to ourselves something like: 'It is OK! This feeling will not last forever. It is just like a stormy wave arising on the surface of a vast, deep ocean.' You may feel knocked about a bit by this stormy wave, but I can promise you, you will not completely drown in it, because at your very core, you are not the wave, you are the ocean.

This strategy for dealing with all kinds of distressing thoughts and feelings really fully dawned on me last week as I re-read Mingyur Rimpoche's amazing book *In Love with the World*. Whilst writing about his own incredible near death experience whilst he was on a challenging solo retreat in India, Mingyur Rimpoche gives some wonderful Buddhist teachings, especially about riding all the challenging waves in our lives. He states that whilst sometimes these waves may seem terrifying, if we learn to steady our own agitated mind, we can begin to glimpse '*the boundless expanse of water beneath the surface*

and this gives us more confidence to let them (the waves) be. Then we can begin to say to ourselves: Oh, there is a wave forming on the surface of my mind. Okay, no problem.

No ocean is ever going to be without stormy waves from time to time, but eventually, if we keep cultivating a 'calm, abiding mind', even the biggest waves can trouble us less and less. But only if we keep remembering this: We do not need to try to make the surface of our mind calm. We simply need to accept that life as we know it is one continuous flow of waves coming and going.

The ocean that is our life on earth is always changing and there is absolutely nothing we can do to stop this process. When we really get this fundamental fact of life, we can begin to experience some inner freedom from constant egoic grasping (trying to hang onto the good times) and egoic aversion (trying to avoid or push away the bad times).

So to recap: Last week in Assisi, I was noticing wave after wave of irritation arising in my mind. At first, I fought against these waves of irritation, and at one point, I almost drowned in them. But once I remembered to simply let the waves of irritation arise, display and dissolve away to nothing again, they began to bother me a lot less.

However, I do have to confess that the very best moments of this trip to Assisi were after my dear friend had left for home and I was all by myself in my favourite place in the world. At that point, my mind was finally at peace and my heart filled with love and gratitude for all the incredible blessings I had received that week, including the blessing of being annoyed by my dear friend so that I could learn to accept my annoyance as just another wave of energy that was not under my control and was certainly not my fault.

So this month, please do not be disheartened if some stormy waves seem to knock you off balance from time to time. Be like the autumn trees. Copy a deciduous tree that calmly accepts that the autumn weather will at some point blow away all its summer leaves. Keep softening around any negative thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations and keep telling yourself whenever a wave of any kind of pain arises in your system: *This too will pass!*

As well as softly surfing any stormy waves this month, please also spend as much time as you can opening up to little moments of calm, peace and joy that will certainly arise in between any storms that might come your way.

A stormy day in the UK is often followed by a beautiful calm, sunny day. One stormy day followed sooner or later by a day full of sunshine: such is the ever-changing dream down here that we all call 'my life.'

So please, this beautiful autumnal month, relax into gently surfing all the waves, whether they be stormy or serene. But above all, don't forget to enjoy the ever-changing, but never destroyed, ocean of life!!

Peggy Foster
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