



## BERKELEY SHAMBHALA MEDITATION CENTER

### It's Our Turn to Help by Cynthia Kneen

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Ground: *A good society is possible.*

Path: *Being individually courageous, we help society to shift.*

Fruition: *In this way we can help this world  
—it's our turn to help.*

This is a story about little frogs. In the story there are lots of little ponds, and lots of little frogs in each little pond. All the little frogs in all the ponds know that there is depth, dignity and truth to being, simply, a frog in a pond. A frog in one of the ponds knows. You are a frog in another one of the ponds, and you know, too. And you know that the frog next door knows, and you know that he knows that you know. On the other side of you, in the next pond, that frog knows, too. She knows that you know that he knows that you know that he knows, and you know that she knows, too. All the frogs in all the ponds know that you know that they know that you know! But nobody says it. Somehow the frog culture has gone out of sync with what the frogs simply are. This makes the frogs a little crazy, but it's not polite to say it. The way the frog culture has been going along seems smooth enough and all worked out. Some of the frogs proclaim they're in charge, and they say what the other frogs should be thinking. Along the way it has become too daring, too embarrassing, for the little frogs to proclaim frog dignity. What if the little frogs were wrong? Then one day, something modest but momentous happens in one of the ponds. One of the frogs proclaims frog dignity simply. Now it's possible for each little frog to be brave and dignified. It's been done before, and therefore each little frog can do it, too. Each little frog can be a genuine leader. The future of the frog society is completely open.

I think we're like the little frogs in the ponds. The spell of our culture and habitual patterns is very powerful.

Yet a society based on depth, dignity and truth isn't just an odd idea or a fantasy. People everywhere inherently want a good society and a good life. In the Shambhala tradition this vision is intrinsic in human beings—we only need to be courageous and bring it out, like the little frogs. The power of life is in the individual life that each of us has. You can be driving a taxi, doing the dishes, talking to your family or addressing the press. The practice is for you to bring out your unique strength and courage in the situations you have and for me to bring out my unique strength and courage in the situations that are mine. There isn't anything else. Each of us actively creates society every day.

In the Buddhist tradition there are eighty-four people called mahasiddhas who lived in India many centuries ago. In Sanskrit *maha* means great, and *siddha* means an accomplished person, so these people were great practitioners, with great realization. One of them was a prostitute, one was a weapons maker, one was a pimp, one was a king, one was a homeless person who slept for twelve years at a busy intersection in Dehli. Among the mahasiddhas in Tibet, Milarepa was a murderer who had remorse, Marpa was a farmer with a bad temper, Yeshe Tsogyal was a princess who had insight, Gesar of Ling was a legendary warrior who had courage, and Gampopa was a doctor who became a monk. Each of their stories encourages me. You can be a Shambhalian and be a prostitute, a weapons maker, a pimp, a king, a homeless person, a murderer with remorse, a wealthy landowner, a princess, a general, a doctor and a monk. No one is excluded, and nothing you experience is excluded. Each of us can work with whatever situation we have. It's how we do what we do that helps this world that needs our help.

Society is relationships or the energy between things. Buddhism calls this a mandala, which is Sanskrit for collective experiences that are put together in an enlightened or unenlightened way. Shambhala simply calls this a "society." The basic notion is that every-



thing in your world is interdependent and interconnected with everything else. Nothing is excluded—trees, wildfires, pipelines, waterways, animals' activities, humans' activities, the sun, sky, gas stations, trucks, forests, weather, spiders, fizzy drinks and the energy between all these is society. There are multiple societies inside your body. Society includes how countless cells, bacteria and world systems exist in relationship. Society even includes the microscopic life inside your living room couch, on a leaf on the tree outside your window, and in a section of dirt in your garden. Society is that whole complex of relationships and energies between the animate and inanimate, tangible and intangible, seen and unseen. The energy between everything is society. From this point of view, society is natural and fundamental. It doesn't refer purely to human society alone.

Shambhala, however, has a human focus. The driving creative force of Shambhala is to create a decent or enlightened human society on this earth, where the relationships between yourself and your environment are based on basic goodness and a vision that promotes the goodness of life. Enlightened means that a brilliant or awake quality is able to come through. The vision is to organize your relationships on the basis of all-pervasive basic goodness, so the lines of communication are always open. The biggest obstacle to a good society is therefore aggression. Aggression is not the same as anger, which is part of the energy of life. Anger is part of your good workable human equipment. But aggression is different. The purpose of aggression is to cut off communication and destroy relationships. Whether the aggression is toward your environment, toward others or toward yourself, its function is to kill the energy of society, so you have to take aggression out before a decent society can flourish. This responsibility begins with ourselves.

Usually we think someone else is in the lead, someone else is in charge. "That person has the power to influence others. I am nobody!" But you are in the lead in your own world. A single moment of genuineness on your part can have an enormous impact. Something splendid and dignified in your activity goes, "Psst, psst, psst" to your neighbors, and someone in the neighborhood goes, "Did you see that?" and the world goes, "Psst, psst, psst," and passes it along. Like a frog in one of the ponds you influence things that way. You

may not know the effect you have, and it may not be what you think. But what you do and how you do it is contagious; it has an effect. Therefore, the most important thing you can do is to have a view of basic goodness and communicate that in every thought and action.

This world we have is a good world, and it is also in terrible shape. There are wars, famines, murder, new diseases, massive flows of armaments, children who aren't cared for, corruption and endless individual grief. It's a mess. Still, it isn't a hopeless situation. Basic goodness is in you, in others and in the environment. It pervades everything. Basic goodness doesn't guarantee anything, but it does allow you to create either a good society or a degraded one. This is the basic teaching. You don't need to agree on how to hold your knife at the dinner table, what side of a conflict you want to win, or what thoughts to think. But you can agree that everyone without exception is basically good and workable. The approach is that each of us can afford to soften, give in to our humanity, and use it to help someone else.

I have a friend who is a psychotherapist in a large cosmopolitan city. She describes her day like this. "I have to say, there are not too many people out there who are happy. The only one I know is sixty years old, and he's mentally retarded. He does chores for people in the neighborhood, works at the grocery store, and gets a pension from his late father. He has some problems. He's schizophrenic so he hears voices, but he's happy. The others? They're married and dissatisfied. Unmarried and dissatisfied. Have children and are dissatisfied. Don't have children and are dissatisfied. Are poor and dissatisfied. Are rich and dissatisfied. They are not able to appreciate what they have. But what's weird is that he appreciates his life. He says, 'I'm happy spring is here and summer is coming.' Objectively he's most pitiful person I see. People make fun of him on the street. They look at him and think, 'Yuck, I wouldn't want to be him.' But he really appreciates his life! They are young, good looking, have a job, have a boyfriend or girlfriend, and they want medications, because they're miserable. And I wake up feeling miserable, too. What's my goal? To give and not be drained!"

I saw a videotape of Mother Theresa's life. The film showed her going to an orphanage that was under fire in Lebanon after a ceasefire with Israel had broken down. It showed her



in Calcutta caring for lepers. It showed her training novice nuns, saying only women who are cheerful can be candidates for her order. Various Western photographers followed the film crew around. At one point a photographer was so moved, he suddenly broke ranks and said, "Mother, what can I do to help?" My mind went, "Money! She needs money for shelters!" But that's not what Mother Theresa said. She said, "Appreciate. Appreciate." Mother Theresa and my friend's client are teaching us the same thing. Everything is there to be appreciated, everything.

Creating a good society may seem like a big job, but society is relationships, so it begins very small. One little frog shifts, and the pond around it brightens up. There is no prescription, really, for waking up your world, except to be open and compassionate with your everyday challenges as much as you can. The shift happens in the everyday moment. You might be freeing an insect from your bathtub, standing in a checkout line at the store, choosing what tie to wear, cooking dinner, running a business or organizing your neighborhood. You can try to experience basic goodness and the flowing of it in whatever you do. Every situation you are in, without exception, has this possibility. Khandro Rinpoche, a young Tibetan Buddhist teacher, said to a group of her students, "It's not that hard to be enlightened! Just change your patterns! All it takes is courage!"

As I reflect, I can see that other people are the same as I am, with the same kinds of problems and promise. Everyone is going through the same kind of thing. There are millions and billions of people who have the same kind of conflicts and anxieties. In Shambhala an enlightened human society is not a paradise. It is not a realm of bliss where everything is lovely, and no problems are experienced. A good society doesn't mean everyone speaks the same language, is knowledgeable about the world, and has a house with a green lawn, a lawnmower that works, a car in the garage, 2.5 children, a nice neighbor and a chicken cooking in the pot. It's a web of diverse relationships that are reasonable, true and function to hold us together. A good human society is based on this world, the world we have, this one that is personal and real. It includes everything—conflict, poverty, wealth, the natural processes of birth, old age, sickness and death, anger, passion, judges and jails. What's different is that its

potential is beyond what you or I can grasp – a healthy society, with problems that aren't seen as hopeless, where care and respect for each other and the environment are the foundation, and everyone is seen as at some stage of developing individual bravery. This is not to say you don't relate with anything other than people's goodness, but your actions are based on the conviction that tenderness exists in everyone.

Enlightened society happens one by one, like the little frogs in the ponds. You shift. I shift. My neighbor shifts. Someone in Angola shifts. A person in Russia shifts, someone in the Philippines shifts. A gang member shifts. A parliament member shifts. A mother shifts. A child shifts. A news commentator shifts. A prisoner shifts. A warden shifts. A homeless person shifts. Once you realize this, peacefulness and a deep respect for human beings are natural. The help that's needed is to help each person shift, and as they shift, they help the rest of us shift, too. There is no real recipe, except working with what the world presents from the point of view of basic goodness, compassion and courage. The key is never to make a separation between your practice and your everyday life.

Finally, the world isn't a political world, an economic world, a first world, a third world, a domestic world, a work world, a natural world, an international world, a troubled world or a beautiful world. It's all these and all other possibilities. This is more than the message of basic goodness. It is a message of vision. Creating a good society isn't easy, or everyone would be doing it. It takes an awake mind and open heart. It takes courage and dignity. As I have experienced this path, the practice is not about living a lukewarm life. "Yeah, yeah, the present, a vision, courage, dignity, ho hum." You are releasing the sun of basic goodness to shine freely in your life, and its effect is to warm the world. It may look like your everyday action has nothing to do with solving society's big problems, but it does. I said to a friend, "I wonder what I would do if I were caught in the Middle East war." He said, "There's no point wondering that. It's not real. You'd have to fabricate a situation, which is fabricating a thought. Then you'd have to fabricate a response. Then finally you'd end up with a fabricated position. That won't help." I thought, he's right. I have to do what I can do with what's in front of me.



The relationship that can make a difference is personal.

One of my teachers, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, said it something like this. The world isn't biased. It just is what it is. We try to interpret it as good, bad, racist, not racist, rich, poor, masculine, feminine, fair, unfair, capitalist, socialist, for profit, not for profit, kind, cruel, boring, exciting—but fundamentally it just is what it is. The forms that teachings take will come and go. But the ongoing power of life is that the goodness, energy and sacredness of life are always there for you. Finally, your individual softness and bravery truly are the way to be a fully human being. The more conviction you have in this, the more your courage and dignity have an effect in your everyday life.

The notions of awake mind and open heart are not new. They are largely common sense. They are part of the natural wisdom human beings have always had. Each of us can glimpse basic goodness . . . in our system when we are gentle, curious and willing to look. It's as if there were a dynamic of enlightened energy underneath our everyday consciousness. The more we develop conviction in this, the more it helps. All that's required are appreciation and courage.

There is a story about a collection of paintings by Picasso that Picasso kept for himself. One of them is very small, only 7 \_ by 5 \_ inches. It is a very dark oil painting with a figure of a man in the corner wearing a dark hat and overcoat. When asked about it, Picasso said that once the painting was big, "really big, monumental," and he gestured hugely with his arms. Then he said, "But that was long ago. I later painted it over with other subjects many times, then cut it to pieces and then painted it again. This is all that remains. It is my father." I find the journey to live life in a meaningful way is like this story of Picasso's painting. One's vision deepens over time rather than diminishes, and the process of achieving its meaning isn't linear. I suspect this is true for all human beings. Each of us lives our awareness from continuously shifting points of view. Like Picasso's

painting, you change your perspective on your life, change the colors, change the subject, cut it to pieces, and paint it again. Nothing is really final. From one point of view your life looks like a series of continuous mistakes! Yet the hard work of your heart to bring your life's meaning into focus makes the difference. Once you discover its heartfelt meaning, your life has stature. Then as you go about your everyday activity, the power and benefit of your actions increase immensely.

There are many practices you can do to support your journey. Sitting meditation will allow you to experience gaps, so you can see your soft spot. It produces clear seeing, so you can discern what is happening, what your humanity is, and how your world works. As your sympathy is ignited, this naturally extends into meditation in action . . . There are many, many ways to practice. Practice is like life. The more you do it, the more you learn. A friend asked a zen practitioner with a very active life, "When do you practice?" She said, "I practice all the time."

The most important practice is continuity—realizing basic goodness, opening your heart and being brave. Once you realize your basic nature has enlightened qualities, then you can work to create enlightened relationships. There is no real alternative to creating a good society. The world is waiting for you to discover the vision in you, enjoy it and put it to use. Shibata Sensei, my Japanese archery teacher, said about my bow, "Don't treat it like an object of veneration! Use it, use it, use it!" This is true for purpose and vision, too. The world needs this at this time—it's our turn to help.

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