

Meeting Our Demons

by Lisa Hoffman

Is fear your demon? Or perhaps you routinely wrestle with self-criticism or judging others. Do you have a relationship with your demons, or do you run in the opposite direction when resentment, anger or envy arises? I've had a lesson in personal demonology over the last year and once again found that my demons are my teachers.

About six months ago, I was eyeball-to-eyeball with one of my demons and it was not pretty. A Zen priest colleague asked me about a professional conference and I enthusiastically criticized the workshop leadership in great detail. At that moment, I felt good, basking in my training and facilitation expertise. Residing in my confident, competent self was a familiar and safe place.

But, you can always count on your Zen community to blast such places into another dimension. The first blow came when my teacher, Darlene Cohen, gave me a practice for 2008, the year I ordained as a priest. She instructed me to integrate my "uber-confident" and insecure selves. I was flummoxed. First of all, I had no idea how to approach this task, and secondly, I didn't really want to. I wanted to get rid of insecurity and be cool at all times. So I held this practice as a question throughout the year, without much movement. I definitely needed help.

That help, and the second blow, came from my priest colleague, who is also long-term friend. She felt strongly that my criticism of the conference workshops violated the spirit of one of our vows: not to praise self over others. And she believed that with my extensive experience as a facilitator, that was exactly what I had done. She went on to give me additional feedback about ways in which she found me focused on myself rather than what was going on around me.

Her point of view was hard to hear, especially because it was over a birthday brunch she had promised me weeks before. I felt hurt, angry, and my immediate reaction was to strike back. I wanted to criticize and judge her for criticizing and judging me. Internally, I took a step back and other responses arose. I asked myself if this impulse would be helpful. Would I be following the Buddhist precept of right speech by using words that were truthful, kind, helpful and timely? I was annoyed because the answer was so clearly *no*. So I decided to ask questions and receive.

My other response was humbling, and also irritating: her words rang true. So, I decided to let her perspective sink in. I would give it time to see what I needed to learn. Over the next few days and weeks, I realized that this first professional conference as a Buddhist priest had evoked tremendous insecurity. There was so much I hadn't done and studied, and I was among so many ordained practitioners who had extensive experience. I feared I would be exposed as a fraud. And so, the opportunity to display myself as a skilled facilitator was irresistible. And it moved me into a high energy state that excluded others.

I was relieved to know what had driven my oblivious behavior. Now, how was I going to slay this demon once and for all? As I puzzled over this question, Darlene's practice materialized

in my consciousness, and I realized that my demon insecurity wasn't the problem. The real issue was pushing that self away. The path to integrating my "uber-confident" and insecure selves unfolded expansively. And it seemed so obvious that I almost laughed out loud. I simply needed to claim these different selves as my whole self. I reflected on the conference, and saw that beneath the insecurity I felt painfully vulnerable. What would it be like to notice and sink into such vulnerability in the moment? Could I simply feel insecure without jumping into uber-confidence?

The opportunity to this question presented itself the next day, when I was in a group situation that I wasn't sure how to handle. Mindfulness -- noticing the sensations in my body, my feelings, my thoughts -- revealed insecurity (After all, I should know how to handle *every* situation!) and the impulse to jump into that ultra-competent state. Consciousness opened up choices, and mine was to remain silent and vulnerable, wondering what would happen. And what happened was: the insecurity and vulnerability were uncomfortable for a little while and then my experience changed. One of the Buddha's main teachings is the noble truth of impermanence. Everything changes, often quickly. I settled into my insecurity, and was startled by an earthshaking idea: I could let the others address the situation! I got out of the way, and they did so, with aplomb. I learned a lot from their inventiveness, and realized there would have been no space for their creativity had I charged into the situation.

Demons come in all sizes and shapes, some obvious in some subtle. They are often scary, irritating, and can be undermining. They can hold great power over heart, mood and life. But I have learned from my dance with insecurity that my demon's power doesn't come from its essence. It comes from trying to run away, which is impossible. When I claim my demon, it takes its rightful place as part of who I am. And it becomes what my teacher Darlene calls a Dharma gate -- a path to growth.

I can only enter that gate if it is part of my consciousness, which is cultivated through meditation and mindfulness. I can only notice a path that leads to transformation if I am connected to my body, sensations, feelings and thoughts. Then the demon struggle becomes that dance, welcoming home a part of myself that will never be dismissed -- at least not for long.

Recently I had dinner with a friend who was very upset about her aversion to being alone, which led her to feel abandoned and deeply depressed when her boyfriend needed his own time and space. He would respond by withdrawing further, and her depression and anxiety would gain momentum. She had just suffered through a month of such feelings and didn't know what she could do differently.

"How long have you been afraid to be alone?" I asked her. "And how long have you struggled with depression?"

"My whole life!" She replied with vigor.

"And how do you feel about those parts of yourself?"

"I hate them!" She said, "I want them to go away!"

"How has that been working for you?"

"Hasn't worked so far," she said glumly. "They haven't gone away in 45 years, so I think they're here to stay."

We talked about whether she could turn toward the self that didn't want to be alone, and the depressed self, whether she could actually include them in her life and take care of them. Whether she could experiment with what wholeness meant for her.

She let out a deep breath and decided that she would try. After all, she had done therapy and although it helped with understanding, she still felt tackled by these feelings and thoughts. She figured she had nothing to lose and was actually intrigued at the prospect of no longer struggling, to find a way to develop a relationship her fear, anxiety and depression demons.

Shunryo Suzuki, author of *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind* writes: "To give your sheep or cow a large, spacious meadow is the way to control him." That is the meadow of meditation and wholeness, and I often feel my demon insecurity galloping around harmlessly, expending its energy and playing with the other demons, devils and angels in this vast world. I hope my friend finds her wide field.

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