

“Recover Wyoming” is an organization that’s new to Cheyenne and indeed to Wyoming. It supports recovery via coaching for family members and recoverees, offers assistance with employment and housing, and seeks to build communities that are recovery focused. Toward the latter goal, a writing workshop, “In our own Words,” is slated to begin January 31, and an open-mic event, where participants may showcase their talents, is set for February 10.

“Recover Wyoming” recently sponsored the appearance of a comedian from New York. The gesture centered on the idea of comic relief for those of us recovering, or attempting to recover, from substance abuse. To unstinting applause, Jesse Joyce opened with “I’ve been sober for 6 years, 7 months, and 13 days.” Then he delved into a highly entertaining monologue that lasted well over an hour, often poking fun at his own obsessions, phobias, and doomsday imaginings.

Being sober, he shows us, while permitting rational decision-making, does not automatically ensure peace of mind. Mr. Joyce is a jumpy customer. He speaks rapid-fire. The word “apocalypse” features prominently in his spiel. He envisions himself fleeing earthquakes, avalanches, burning buildings. He is Bruce Willis in “Die Hard,” yet there’s always some impediment to his running. A spouse. Babies. “Think Bruce Willis with a three-year-old and a five-year-old.” (Joyce describes himself as married but childless.) He can’t wait to return to the crowds of New York; sparsely-populated Wyoming gives him the willies.

Stand-up comedy is enjoyable because it permits a humorous glimpse into our own deepest fears. In truth, all of us (often? Seldom? One time or other?) envision our own demise, that personal-experience mini-apocalypse that bears down on us with inexorable harshness as our ultimate fate. We try our best to stave it off. We might bargain with Death, Fate, God: “Let me but live another day (week, month, decade), let me accomplish (this or that important task) and I promise I’ll . . .

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Promise what? Go down peaceably instead of kicking and screaming? It’s no matter whether we fight like a samurai or peep like a newborn chick; indeed, eventually the clamor dribbles down to the peep of a chick and then “is heard no more.” As James Baldwin put it, “The big fish eat the little fish and the ocean doesn’t care.”

But we care. We can’t help ourselves. We care intensely about “this little light of mine.” However often we may wish to lay our burden down, we also want to keep the flame alive. These conflicting impulses, besides fear of death, cause us much distress.

A few years ago a seatmate in an airplane was engrossed in a book that piqued my interest. At the end of the plane ride she passed it to me, saying someone else had given it to her and now that she’d absorbed its essence, she would let go of it. Its title is “What makes you not a Buddhist,” and its author distills Buddhist teaching into these four exigencies:

Can you accept that all things are impermanent and that there is no essential substance or concept that is permanent?

Can you accept that all emotion brings pain and suffering and that there is no emotion that is purely pleasurable?

Can you accept that all phenomena are illusory and empty?

Can you accept that enlightenment is beyond concepts; that it's not a perfect blissful heaven, but instead a release from delusion?

When we are able to live by these edicts we may consider ourselves Buddhists in the Tibetan tradition, says Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse, who'd like us to enter a problem-free zone. Nirvana is neither happiness nor unhappiness; it's a letting-go of suffering and illusion, he explains; indeed, the word Buddha is not someone's name, not even Siddharta's; rather, it's the seeking of awareness. Through awareness we transcend karma, both good and bad, which makes empathy possible. The causes of violence vanish; our reasons for anger vanish. The Buddhist practice of nonviolence, author Khyentse tells us, is not meek submissiveness but the giving up of a fixation on concepts such as justice or morality. Fixations usually arise from dualistic views: bad and good, ugly and beautiful, moral and immoral. Understanding that these concepts are fleeting goes a long way toward tolerance. Morality feeds the ego, and our ego shapes us into puritanical and punitive individuals. When we free ourselves from the habit of polarizing our views, we free ourselves from fixations.

People sometimes think that to practice Buddhism means leaving home, family, job, to engage in a life of ascetic meditation. Actually, no. All you need is to step outside on a clear night—thankfully, these are plentiful in Wyoming. There's nothing like awareness of the universe to make us realize how little we matter in the grand scheme of things. Earth, our dear planet with its diversity of life forms, human accomplishments, and natural wonders, when viewed from another vantage point is but a speck of dust, easily overlooked in the vastness of star clusters, supernovas, galaxies.

If you're a jumpy customer, you may think yourself too impatient to wrap your mind around Buddhist ideas. You may want to cling to big-city hustle and bustle, blaring TV, ringing telephone, tootling apps. Try anyway. Step outside your comfort zone. Seek solitude. It may just take you on a stroll toward moments of inner peace.