

Our conversation may flow off script at times, but I hope this scripted version will help those with hearing loss to follow along as well as possible. Blessings! *-Angela*

Angela: Ani Jamgyal is a monastic in a Tibetan Buddhist lineage. She was given the name Jamgyal 10 years ago when she took ordination vows. “Ani” translates as “auntie” and is the title used by Tibetans to refer to their Buddhist nuns, much like “sister” is used to refer to Catholic nuns in the Americas.

Ani Jamgyal’s root teacher--Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche--is a Tibetan lama who now lives in Crestone, CO where he oversees the Mangala Shri Bhuti Samten Ling meditation retreat center. After spending a year in retreat, Ani spoke with Rinpoche about her wish to return to NM and serve members of vulnerable communities. Rinpoche agreed and entrusted her with a daily study and practice program to support her service work in the Albuquerque community.

I first met Ani Jamgyal through the NM Faith Coalition for Immigrant Justice....

So, Ani Jamgyal, First Unitarian’s theological theme this month is letting go. Today, specifically, is about letting go of fear. You told me a story about this, from when you were a little kid. Will you share that with the congregation?

Ani: Sure! My babysitter took me to an amusement park one day and helped me get seated on a ride. The individual compartments each held one child and looked like small airplanes. I thought it would be like other rides where we just went around slowly in a circle. But instead, as the little airplanes moved forward, they also raised up off the ground into the air. This completely freaked me out. In my terror, I reached out to this post sticking up between my legs and clutched it to me. It turns out, this was a lever that made the plane go higher, which made me even more terrified.

Angela: I love this story because the fear was causing you to tighten your grip. So you had to let go of the fear in order to release your grip.

Ani: But no, I wasn’t actually able to do that. I didn’t make the connection that pulling the lever made me go higher. Clinging to it provided my only comfort, so cling I did! I just screamed throughout the whole ride and sobbed in my babysitter’s arms after it was over!

Angela: I feel so much compassion for that little girl on the ride. Fear has valuable information to share, but sometimes it's hard to sort out what kind of fear we are experiencing. Some fear is meant to preserve our lives or health. You must have been scared for your life on that ride!

Fear of an aggressive dog is another example of that mortal kind of fear. I'd put fear of giant insects in that category too. A couple of weeks ago, a wise friend of Dan's named Kishan shared the Sunday message with him. Kishan used to live in India and at the 9:30 service they told the story of opening the shower curtain one day to find a cockroach "the size of the piano." That's really something because Nob Hill has some freaking huge cockroaches. It was moving its wings, getting ready to *fly*. Kishan, who was raised Catholic, reacted by saying the Hail Mary.

Fear can be a friend. When our lives are in danger, it spurs us to action. When our lives are not in danger, in my experience, fear can still be a friend, if we are curious about it. It's a friend that can teach us about ourselves and help us to develop more expansive souls.

I think social anxiety can be one example. Many people feel anxious about certain kinds of social situations. I do, too, sometimes. For example, when my husband and I travel to Colombia, where he is from, I find myself in a completely different context. Not only does his family belong to a completely different culture, they also belong to a higher social class than my family of origin. I often feel like I don't understand the rules of interaction. And this makes me really anxious. At the root of that anxiety is a fear of being rejected. In response to that, for a long time I used to clam up a lot around my in-laws. And.. I think they experienced me as not particularly friendly. So that really backfired. But eventually I decided to look my fear in the eye. And I decided to set the fear aside. Instead, I'd focus on accepting and loving them, and being curious about them, without any attachment to wanting to be liked myself. This changed everything.

Ani: I bet! It would be hard not to like someone who accepts, loves, and is curious about you.

Angela: Right. And the people I have most admired, the ones who seemed to me to have "expansive souls," are people who practice acceptance, love, and curiosity. The trick is, when we are in the middle of fear, we do kind of grip onto it. And we have to let go in order to be curious about it and kind of turn it over and examine it.

What does Buddhism say about these things?

Ani: Well, first I'd like to say that Buddha taught what he taught. And then he said, "Check it out for yourself." His words were more like "I give you these teachings as though they are gold. And

just as a goldsmith would, you must examine them closely to see if they are indeed gold, to see if these teachings hold true in your own life experience and observation". Buddha didn't advocate hero worship or blind faith. So, when I say stuff about Buddha's teachings, generally I'm talking from my own experience of them and understanding that comes from that experience. I'm not promoting an ideology. So there's my disclaimer.

In order to talk about letting go of fear, it's helpful to say a little first about letting go in general...

From the Buddhist perspective as well as from my own experience, I know how *not* letting go feels and how that feeling impacts my interactions with others. And I know how *not* letting go functions in my life and how harmful *not* letting go is for all of us. *Not* letting go is a form of aggression in the Buddha's way of seeing things. And I agree with the Buddha's observation. I have found repeatedly that when I don't let go, I end up harming myself and those around me.

Here's a very simple example: when I'm holding onto something physical, after a while, my fingers cramp. My hand gets sore and starts throbbing. My hand is connected to an arm whose muscles are also gripping. Typically, if my arms are gripping so are muscles in my back. My whole body, many of the major muscles are contracted. And I find that when I'm thinking certain kinds of things, my facial muscles, shoulder and back muscles also seize up. Muscles are not designed to stay contracted. They are designed to contract and then release. They are designed to keep moving in a world that is continuously changing.

Angela: This reminds me of the way fear is such an embodied sensation. We think of it as a thought up here (in our heads), but really it's a bodily experience. Sometimes I don't even know that fear is what I'm experiencing until I check in with my body. I might think I'm feeling indignant, angry, or powerless. Fear can masquerade as those things, but then when I ask "what's happening in my body right now? What's my body telling me?" I notice my stomach hurts, my shoulders are tense, I'm breathing faster than normal, and I have a feeling of adrenaline. And it may turn out that I'm not angry, for example, at my child for coming home after curfew without telling me. I'm *scared*, because I love them and I don't want anything to happen to them. But the body knows.

We can train ourselves to tune in and notice what's really happening. The breath is useful for this. If we can get into the habit of noticing the breath, that helps us re-center in the present and be awake to what is happening.

Ani: Yes! And that's one of the reasons for shamatha, a meditation technique that focuses on the sensations involved in breathing. Dropping into the sensation of breathing brings us into awareness of how we are feeling.

But once we know we're feeling fear, then how do we release it? How do we let go when the urge to hold on is so strong? And what if we are sure that we 'know' something or someone? Why would we let go of something that we believe to be true?

Sometimes it helps to trace back to starting points. If we're not letting go, we're holding on tight. To hold on to something tightly, there has to be something solid to hold onto. You can't hold on to water, for example. Ice, yes. Water, no.

This is true of our minds, as well. Our minds can only hold onto something solid and unchanging. But something you notice in meditation is how fluid the thought process is. Interestingly, to make an idea or belief solid requires a lot of effort, a lot of repetition and also an active process of construction.

Typically fear, anxiety and hatred are ideas, feelings and thought streams fabricated in our own endlessly creative minds from bits and pieces of perception. The way some marine critters create their own shells. They secrete a liquid glue drop by drop and use it to glue together particles of sand, tiny rocks, even bits of glass and broken shell fragments that have been worn down and smoothed. The glue hardens as the critter works and the end result is a hard shell in which the critter can live. These shells are often quite elaborate and fascinating.

We do this with our minds with tidbits of facts, rumors, assumptions, myths and observations, gluing them together with our prevailing mood and unconscious habits. Notice you can take a set of details and if you're in love, the glue makes one kind of solid idea. But if you are in a state of conflict, those very same details get glued together into a very different solid idea of who the person is. Also, repetition further solidifies our beliefs. Notice that we tell our story over and over. The idea or belief that we have created can be pleasing, it can be comforting, it can be frightening and even terrifying. But always it feels/appears solid. Now we have made something we can hold on to. Even if it terrifies us, even if it harms us by filling us with anxiety and causing cortisol to flow into our blood and harm our internal organs, still we hold onto it...

So, back to our topic--what does this have to do with letting go of fear? The point is that it's harder to let go of something if you believe it to be true. It helps us let go of something once we see that it really isn't so solid after all. From the Buddhist perspective, the effort isn't in letting

go, but in engaging in an active process of deconstructing the illusion of solidity, the illusion of an unchanging, solid reality.

This is what Thich Nhat Hanh does with the piece of paper: he shows us it is not inherently made up of paper building blocks but instead is made up of billions of nonpaper elements. If you apply that to some person that you're hating because they are inherently evil, you find they are made of sun, of stardust, of gravity and time; they are made of the ocean and they will be made of the birdsong and other sensations they haven't yet experienced because they too are constantly changing.

Angela: In Unitarian Universalism, our seventh principle is "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." What you are describing reminds of that principle. And, this is kind of a different take but I think it's related: remembering that I am part of something larger than myself often helps me when I feel afraid...for example, when I get nervous about public speaking. Which I still do. How about you? It helps to remember that I do it for a larger purpose. It's not really about me or whether I am perfect or not. And that makes me feel braver.

Ani, you and I met at the NMFCIJ, working on immigrant justice. That feels like an overwhelming issue. I marched in my first immigration justice protest twenty five years ago, when anti-immigrant voices were cranking up an atmosphere of fear in my home state of Oregon. Pregnant undocumented women were afraid to go to the hospital, because some hospitals were turning people in to INS- which is what we had before ICE. Imagine giving birth without a midwife, because you're afraid officers will barge into your hospital room and drag you away. It is inhumane to put women in that position.

Today, the border is a militarized zone, with thousands of desperate people seeking asylum stuck in limbo on the other side. No shelter. No medical care. Not enough food and other basic necessities. It's clearly a humanitarian crisis. But our president wants to call it a national emergency. And it's just one of so many issues in our country.

How do you link this conversation to that reality?

Ani: Well, yes, the suffering imposed by our political system and its failings is creating undue suffering for so many dear people. Standing by, feeling largely helpless in the face of the enormity of the suffering is itself a suffering.

When I ponder what is MY greatest fear, it's that we'll collectively be so paralyzed by fear and overwhelmed by the enormity and chaos of the moment, that we as a people will fail to rise to the challenge of engaging in what's happening in our community, our state, our nation, our planet. That fear can really grab me by the throat and choke me, leaving me short of breath and kind of panicked. My fantasies involve smuggling people across the border, breaking kids out of detention, mobs storming the white house and congress and and and...

And then I breathe. Once, twice, three times. And then I'm back, here, now in my own body, grounding myself in doing whatever is the next best thing that i can do, here, now. That seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism really speaks to this. "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." The sun, as powerful as it is, cannot make a piece of paper by itself. All those elements are needed. In fact, the sun is kind of helpless. And yet, the sun is essential.

As small and seemingly insignificant as our individual contributions may seem in the enormity of it all, that we each make our contribution is, in fact, essential. It is a paradox that requires us to have faith/confidence in the interdependent nature of the unseeable and unknowable whole that each of us is embedded in. So that's how I encourage myself and also others to participate in whatever way is feasible, doable, possible and not sweat the enormity of it all. Just breathe, come back, and proceed.

Angela: There is beauty in that. We do not have to save everything in the world at once- we can't. Therefore, the present is a goal in and of itself. It reminds me of Mr. Rogers telling children that in times of fear and danger, they should "look for the helpers." There are always helpers. There many ways people in our congregation can get involved in immigration. First U still provides sanctuary accompaniment at First Congregational, which means volunteers take shifts to be present with a man who has taken refuge there to avoid an unjust deportation order. UUs can support the Border Servant Corp based in Las Cruces, which provides humanitarian relief at the border. UUs also volunteer in court accompaniment, working with asylum seekers who have been granted temporary entry into the US while their cases are considered. We currently need volunteers with our ESL and citizenship classes.

The Immigrant Justice Task Force helps put congregation members in touch with those organizations which need volunteers. For information, visit the Connections Table in the foyer after the service, or reach out to our Justice Coordinator Beth Elliot to receive contact information for the Immigrant Justice Task Force: belliot@uuabq.org.