

The Wolf We Choose to Feed

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*A grandfather was speaking to his grandson about violence and cruelty in the world and how it comes about. He said it was as if two wolves were fighting in his heart. One wolf was vengeful and angry, and the other wolf was understanding and kind. The young man asked his grandfather which wolf would win the fight in his heart. And the grandfather answered, “The one that wins will be the one I choose to feed”. – From *Taking the Leap* by Pema Chodron (adapted)*

The story of the two wolves is widely known. We don't really know where it comes from. Suffice it to say that it's a wisdom tale, and it comes to the foreground when we need to hear it most. The story was widely told back in 2001, after the September 11 attacks, and it speaks to us now, in the aftermath of a closely-contested election.

The story of the two wolves has the quality of a parable. Seemingly simple, it grabs you and doesn't let you go. There's more than one way to interpret this parable, as it stirs you up, and offers you a choice.

What grabs me about the parable? It points to powerful, contradictory forces that motivate me as a human being. There are many ways we could name the two wolves that struggle in opposition: Reason and chaos. Truth and falsehood. Selflessness and greed. Humility and arrogance. Kindness and hostility. Love and fear.

Does one wolf ever win out completely? It would appear to be a lifelong struggle. But in feeding one wolf you reduce the strength of the other. If you indulge your greed, you starve your generosity. If you make a habit of empathy, you reduce your selfishness. Over the long haul you can nurture the strengths of one wolf over the other.

To have both a Kind Wolf and a Hostile Wolf is part of human nature. But you refrain from feeding one wolf, it can grow vanishingly small, as the other one grows large. With time and patience, you can alter the balance of power.

The parable of the two wolves offers you a choice. We have these opposing forces within us, but we can come to terms with them. We can develop virtues on a small scale, and prepare ourselves to apply them in larger situations.

To be human is to live at a crossroad. Are we living in a way that adds to the aggression in society, or adds sanity? How shall we engage in the inner work that trains us to feed the right wolf?

Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron explores this basic question in her book titled *Taking the Leap: Freeing Ourselves from Old Habits and Fears*. She offers a conceptual framework and a spiritual practice to help us break free of destructive habits of mind.

What happens if you stop right now and pause? Whatever you are doing, just pause; take three conscious breaths, being fully aware of how it feels to be in your body, with the thoughts and feelings you are having in this moment ...

You can do this in response to an event that you consider an interruption. For example, when the phone rings, and before you pick it up, smile. Imagine the person at the other end of the line and smile at them. Now pick up the phone.

Now imagine a more highly-charged situation. Imagine a situation that triggers fear or frustration. Consider how you normally deal with this ... but what happens if you stop right now and pause?

Stop right now before hitting “send” on that snarky email message, or making that angry phone call, or beeping that horn, or tweeting that tweet. Pause, and take three conscious breaths. Feel what it’s like to be in your body, with these thoughts and these feelings, right now. What happens?

In a situation that triggers us emotionally we have two opportunities. The first opportunity is to recognize the Hostile Wolf preparing to act. The second opportunity is to choose to manifest the Kind Wolf instead.

One way to feed the Kind Wolf is by getting to know the Hostile Wolf better. Without malice, we interrupt the force that is raging. We make space for our natural openness, warmth, and courage to emerge.

To pause, when our emotions are triggered, is a useful strategy. And even better: to stay with those feelings, and come to know our habitual response, without acting it out.

Imagine a child with poison ivy. Imagine being that child ... You want to relieve the discomfort, so you scratch. But every time you scratch, you make the condition worse.

Now imagine that you are the parent of that child. To treat the child's condition, you offer two things. You provide some medicine such as calamine lotion, to dry out the rash and help it to heal. And, you provide the caveat, not to scratch the rash anymore when it itches.

That's how you learn not to feed the Hostile Wolf. Paradoxically, you pay attention to the thoughts and feelings that would trigger you to act. You settle down with those feelings and let them be. You let the impulse take its course without acting on it.

Tibetan Buddhism has a name for this situation: Shenpa, or attachment. Shenpa is the itch *and* the urge to scratch.

We have knee-jerk habits that we use to escape discomfort. We deal with the discomfort by seeking pleasure to distract us, or by numbing the pain, or by striking out in aggression. But these reflexive actions only create more Shenpa.

The Shenpa process happens quickly, pre-consciously, breeding thoughts, emotions and the urge to act. But if you catch yourself early, you can work with it. Even if you're already responding, and the Hostile Wolf has a head start, you can interrupt the process midstream and back off. With practice, you can foresee the whole chain-reaction of Shenpa and where it will lead.

Just from recent days, I can think of some examples. The Friday before the election, I heard the news that on a Texas highway, a caravan of Trump supporters had surrounded a Biden campaign bus, obstructing its movement and nearly running it off the road. On Twitter the President responded: "I love Texas!" My Shenpa was a mixture of despair and anger. What's wrong with these people? Yet another act of bullying and intimidation rewarded, not punished!

A more benign example: the morning after Election Day. Miraculously, I had slept the night. But the first thing I did was to hop on the computer and check the election results. Then I went to do my morning meditation. My practice is to sit quietly and pay attention to my breathing. But every few minutes, I had this itch, this impulse to get up off my cushion, and run to my computer, and check those election results again. This is the real meditation practice: to experience the itch, and not scratch it.

Pema Chodron compares Shenpa to a fish biting a hook. Imagine you're a fish in a pond ... Up ahead, you see a glittering, dancing lure. It advertises all the qualities of a living minnow. It screams, "Food!" Next thing you know, you've bitten the hook and you

are struggling against the pull of the line. That's Shenpa – that's attachment. That's what it means to get hooked!

But if you look around the pond, you will notice some older fish. They notice the lure but they're not so quick to take it. The older fish have learned to distinguish shiny lures from real food. You can learn to foresee the consequences of biting the hook, and all the suffering it leads to. You can recognize the impulse to attack, and wait it out.

This is how we learn to feed the right wolf. We can see the Shenpa happening and we don't add energy to it. We accept the presence of an impulse and recognize it as a story we've lived through before, even as we refrain from acting it out.

Here are some simple steps to remember, when you find yourself in a Shenpa situation: Acknowledge that you've been hooked. Pause. Take three conscious breaths. Attend to what you're feeling, right now. What's it like to be in your body with these thoughts and feelings? Lean into this, abide with it, but don't be seduced by the momentum of the situation. Drop the story-line, and let it resolve itself.

In this way, we can connect with our natural wisdom, if only for a little while. We learn to feed the Kind Wolf by getting to know the Hostile Wolf.

Working with ourselves in this way, dealing with small frustrations, we can train ourselves to face situations of great adversity. Coming to terms with the Hostile Wolf in ourselves, we can learn to do so at the interpersonal level, and in the larger human community.

As you come to know the Hostile Wolf in yourself, as you come to know what it means to get carried away, you grow in empathy. You become more willing to accept the predicament of other people, when they get caught. You realize "we're all in the same boat".

In a situation that could lead to conflict, you can recognize the Shenpa that arises between you and the other person. You can make a conscious choice: Will you react to the Shenpa of the other person, thus feeding their Hostile Wolf and escalating the conflict?

You can interrupt the Shenpa in yourself. You can abide with the other person in the midst of their Shenpa. You don't have to shut down emotionally, or take an entrenched position.

Our current President has personified the wolf we don't want to feed. Through Twitter and many other channels, he has propagated Shenpa by word and deed. He has dangled the hook repeatedly, and too many people have bitten down on the hook, and been taken by it. Our current President has also modeled what it means to be hooked, himself responding viscerally to Shenpa situations, and too many people have followed his example. Let's not do it. We always have that choice.

Over the past four years this country has lived as a house divided, one side demonizing the other; labeling people as "one of us" or "one of them". As Pema Chodron describes, "Our fixed ideas about 'them' arise quickly, and this has again and again caused great suffering. This is a very old habit, a crippling habit, a universal response to being threatened. We can look at this habit with compassion and openness but not continue to reinforce and strengthen it". (69)

So it was with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who spoke to the "better angels" of our nature as the American people. He did not feed violence with violence. He understood that racism expresses an ancient habit of mind that is rooted in fear. He held up a mirror for us to look at the racism in our political system, in our society, and in ourselves. He would not have us hate the racist – that's feeding the Hostile Wolf. He would have us touch the fear, at the bottom of all prejudice. He would have us touch that fear with compassion.

This past week the nation held its collective breath, as a closely-contested election played itself out. We're now in a time of transition, and the start of a long process of healing. In the coming days and weeks there will be many opportunities to feed the wrong wolf.

You may be tempted to demonize the other side – don't. Remember to breathe. Cultivate the kind of wisdom that comes from acknowledging the angry wolf in yourself and others. Make room for compassion to grow in its place.