Reflection for Sunday, August 16 by Mary Cosman

***Laughter is the best medicine***

As many of my friends at Knox know, I engage in daily Buddhist practices in the Tibetan tradition. A few weeks ago, I was able to participate in a live teaching given by Lama Samten in Toronto. Of course, I was not at the Paramita Centre, but as so many gatherings are experienced these days, as we’re doing right now, I was comfortable at home, with my laptop (not my lap dog) on my lap. At the Centre, the Lama was joined by a small group of students, socially distanced, along with his senior student, Jason, was who translating both his heavily accented English and his Tibetan speech.

As has been the case since the Buddha began teaching over 2500 years ago, the primary and only verifiable mode of receiving teaching in these traditions has been by personal transmission from teacher to student, mind to mind. Being physically with one’s teacher, just as the disciples and his followers were with Jesus, is the traditional way to receive this spiritual knowledge. Of course, through the ages, our teachers and ministers have had to find other ways, through sacred miracles of healing and, these days, miraculous technologies to reach us. Lama Samten told us to each imagine, along with him, that he was actually placing his hands on our head.

All this to tell you of a realization I had during the Lama’s transmission of a practice called *Menla*, or Healing Buddha. Teachings like this, called empowerments, consist of the teacher’s prayers and bestowal of blessing as well as instructions on how to visualize and direct your thoughts in the practice. *Menla* is a prayerful effort of self-healing. Very serious stuff.

Well into the ceremony, amidst the lines of a few of the chants he was reciting in Tibetan, the Lama began chuckling, a gentle heartfelt laughter. He was laughing! Only later, it struck me that he was experiencing, embodying one of the Four Joys: Sympathetic Joy, the one where joy is felt upon realizing the happiness and good fortune of others. He was laughing *for* us.

In today’s scripture readings, Joseph was overcome with emotion when he faced his brothers, and as they talked on together about all their hardships, I’m sure there was laughter amidst their tears. Certainly they felt joy when Joseph spoke of settling their people in Goshen as refugees of famine.

But in today’s verses from Matthew, there was no laughter, although certainly it must have come, along with tears of joy, in the family of the Canaanite woman after Jesus recognized her faith and healed her daughter. But before that, he and his disciples acted simply annoyed. Annoyed that yet another person was asking for something, and in fact someone from a tribe they had no respect for. Jesus insulted her! Were they being xenophobic? Racist? Remember, this was a place where too many tribes had been fighting over too little good land for a very long time and even as late as Jesus’ time, as the overrun cultures were absorbed there still was ethnic strife.

In his treatment of the Canaanite woman, though, was Jesus displaying his humanness, so we could recognize it in ourselves? Or was the teacher himself being taught by this mother as she challenged him?

Still, today, we recognize these feelings – they’re part of how humans always have been. Lately, with the work of groups like Black Lives Matter challenging us, we’re being asked to recognize these emotions in ourselves, to question what’s in our own hearts, to profess to and act on anti-racism, rather than just frowning on racism.

In Tibetan meditations, one is taught to consider the mental poisons or kleshas, and to meditate on their antidotes. For example, to recognize jealousy one meditates on its antidote, joy in order to dissolve the power of that poisonous emotion.

In this time of pandemic, and its social, political and economic upheaval, when we are aware of and perhaps experiencing suffering, grief and loss remember how so very fortunate we are to have teachers and ministers, scriptures and seminars to guide us into finding that joy!

The lama’s laughter I heard a few weeks ago reminded me of what I echo daily as I recite the Hundred Syllable Mantra of purification. In the heart of this Sanskrit mantra, there are five syllables which (according to the commentaries) help us to recognize the joy that we all can make our own and keep with us, and they need no translation. They are: *ha ha ha ha ha!* So as you go through your days, do remember joy with, if not laughter, perhaps just a little smile.