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Crying From Happiness **Liberating Occupied Minds with Mindfulness**

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Abstract: I do not wish to dwell here upon our [Palestinian] national struggle, but to share with you instead something of my own experience. I will speak about the personal changes and insights that came to me after I had the good fortune to encounter the art of mindfulness. The encounter both changed my life and enabled me to reach out to other people and invite them too to try this way. The experience awakened my heart and connected me to the joy, love and wisdom inside me. It enabled me to recognize and see angles and corners of myself that I neither knew about or believed existed. I grew aware of possibilities and quantities of freedom which freed the locks and chains that had gathered rust over so many years. Slowly I learned to feel that a human being is free and whole, whereas previously fear, anxiety and anger had gnawed at me, dictating my way of thinking and acting. I had acquired these from my environment and took them to be the most suitable armor for defending myself against a sea of pain, fear and desperation. All that happened in circles, either close to me or further away, pained my body and soul. And indeed, the people around me seem to function like a factory with a never-ceasing production line of suffering.

I am Samiyeh Sharqawi, a fifty-three year old mother of four, living in the Palestinian village of Musmus, close to Nazareth. I am the daughter of a Muslim family.

My parents, like our ancestors, were born and raised in Palestine. My mother worked the land. My father wrote poetry and stories about the people that inhabited it.

Samiyeh Sharqawi, married with four children, was born in 1955 to a Muslim Palestinian family in the village of Baqa al-Gharbiah, living today in the village of Musmus, both in northern Israel. She has been a social worker, working with group facilitation for 20 years, dealing with social and educational issues such as groups of women, parents, social activists, coaching staffs of NGOs and governmental organizations. She currently facilitates a group of Palestinian women artists in Wadi Arah area on the issue of clarifying the process of inquiry and deepening awareness of the connection between art work and community. In the past, she has worked as a social worker in a mental health hospital and as a community worker in the bureau of social services in Taibeh. She facilitated encounter workshops for mixed Palestinian and Jewish groups and has volunteered in the Al-Siwar women's association to support victims of rape. She has also coached and guided teaching staffs in Arab high schools on issues of identity, having taught in Oranim College on the subject of identity in a multicultural society. In the summer of 2002 Samiyeh took part in a delegation of Jews and Palestinians who travelled to Plum Village, France in order to learn and practice the art of mindfulness while conducting a dialogue on the issue of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The continuation of this work is an initiative by her and her friend Taghrid Musa and the facilitation of mindfulness workshops for Palestinian groups in Israel. This essay was translated by Howard Shippin.

Sixty years ago, almost to the day, the earth shook. The state of Israel sprang up and seventy five per cent of my people instantly became refugees. Since then, my family and I have belonged to the minority that remained as strangers in our homeland. Once lords of this land and of ourselves, we fell victim to policies of systematic oppression, discrimination and exclusion, by a regime that also attempts to rob us of our historical memory and identity as a people. Despite everything, we struggle to survive, to remain on our lands, to maintain our dignity and to win the right to be treated as equal citizens.

I do not wish to dwell here upon our national struggle, but to share with you instead something of my own experience. I will speak about the personal changes and insights that came to me after I had the good fortune to encounter the art of mindfulness. The encounter both changed my life and enabled me to reach out to other people and invite them too to try this way. The experience awakened my heart and connected me to the joy, love and wisdom inside me. It enabled me to recognize and see angles and corners of myself that I neither knew about or believed existed. I grew aware of possibilities and quantities of freedom which freed the locks and chains that had gathered rust over so many years. Slowly I learned to feel that a human being is free and whole, whereas previously fear, anxiety and anger had gnawed at me, dictating my way of thinking and acting. I had acquired these from my environment and took them to be the most suitable armor for defending myself against a sea of pain, fear and desperation. All that happened in circles, either close to me or further away, pained my body and soul. And indeed, the people around me seem to function like a factory with a never-ceasing production line of suffering.

As a woman, an Arab, and a Palestinian with Israeli citizenship, my reality is formed by personal, social and political el-

ements that continually jolt and threaten to destabilize me. Without leaning on personal strengths and inner stability, I could lose both my head and my humanity. Without feeling and observing this reality, it is possible to be dragged into a paralysing whirlpool.

As a woman, I am locked in an endless struggle to maintain my value as a person, uphold my integrity, and realise my right to personal fulfilment. As a Palestinian Arab in Israel, I am obliged to fight to maintain an honourable existence and identity. Several times each day I am reminded of the extent of my inequality and am constrained to make do with being a second class citizen. Like Palestinians who live in Israel or in the Palestinian Authority, I am forced to deal constantly and in various ways with problems of existence and dignity, and the struggle for freedom, happiness and fulfilment.

This reality taught me and many others like me that anger is a necessary provision for our journey, and the best tool for the struggle in all the circles that I have mentioned. I was pulled along this path with neither the ability nor the volition to resist.

A few years ago one of my friends gave my name as a candidate to participate in a mixed group of Palestinians and Jews who would go for an encounter in Plum Village, France. This was the first time that I had heard of that place or of the way of life there. I was busy with my angry struggles, so my first answer was a stubborn refusal. I said I had no time for such a venture: there are more crucial and meaningful things that I need to do in life than meeting Jews in a monastery and practising meditation with them. This isn't the way to solve our problems. However, my friend Taghrid, who is also my colleague today, did not let up. Calmly and persistently, she continued to speak to me and persuade me to take part. Fortunately—and about this I am really thankful to her—I said I would give it a try.

My stay in Plum Village proved to be extremely difficult. I felt coerced and constricted. Anger was written all over my face for almost all of my time there. Yet apparently, despite my resistance and refusal to commit to the experience, something penetrated my soul through channels that were not completely blocked. This can only be due to the special manner of the monks and nuns who accompanied us on our stay there.

On my return home, a seed began to germinate in me, or you could say that a small lamp had been lit and its light began to spread—because that's the nature of light—to spread and illuminate. I clearly remember that this first experience, after which I might have stopped, somehow gave me the ability to extricate myself from the vicious circle in which I was caught. It provided me with the strength to counter the force of the usual and that which I had taken for granted.

The first thing I did was to stop running and breathe. Formerly I could not stop, but was pulled along blindly. Stopping to breathe wasn't so easy, because I smoked. But I continued to breathe and stopped smoking. I began to see better, to hear better and to listen deeply. I began to digest everything that I had resisted when I was in Plum Village. It was as if I was in a condition of withdrawal, of detoxification, both from cigarettes and from the anger that occupied my soul. I began to compile a new lexicon, *breathing with awareness, living with awareness, reflecting, slowing down, and enjoying* a little. I began to enjoy all the little things about which I was not previously aware. I hadn't had time for them. My eyes were unable to see them, my heart was unable to feel softness and kindness without fear. I had been afraid of weakness. I began to smile and not be ashamed, to be proud of parts of myself that I had previously hidden. Things acquired levels of meaning that were deeper and simpler at the same time; things that had been both so close to me,

and yet which at the same time had been so far away. When I discovered, touched and made friends with these aspects of my life, I felt enchanted and calm. People around me said that this was a different Samiyeh, and asked where I had found her. I told them that in Plum Village they had helped me to become acquainted with her and stop oppressing her—to be proud of her and love her instead. This was the tool kit which I took to work as a group facilitator. That which I had become helped me to improve and refine my abilities in my work as a group facilitator.

Now I would like to speak about my partners, the women to whom I am indebted today. These are Dorit Shippin, who is with me at the conference, and Taghrid Musa who remains back home. They are my partners on the path of bringing light and awareness, peace and deep listening, to the various groups of people from the Arab community with whom we have begun to work. In the beginning, Taghrid and I hesitated to go out and approach people in our society since we were afraid that they would see the practice as distant and alienated from our religions and possibly even as a threat. Such practice is unknown in our society and few people have been exposed to it. However, in our hearts we knew this is the way to relieve people's suffering. Taghrid and I worked to prepare for a series of workshops on meditation. Our friend Dorit helped us to organize and raise funds. We chose the spiritual centre of the Arab-Jewish village of Wahat al-Salam—Neve Shalom for a venue. We advertized, and a number of people registered for the first meeting. We arrived, prepared the room, and waited for the participants to come. The time passed and no one came, not even one person. I felt a deep sadness and tears welled up in my eyes. Taghrid hugged me and said there is no reason to be sad: when people are ready they would arrive.

The failure of this first meeting at Wa-

hat as-Salam convinced us that we needed to make a greater effort to go out to people and organize activities for them closer to their homes or work places. We began immediately, and managed to organize sessions for a variety of different populations. When we began to work, I once again had a feeling of magic. We were able to suit the practice to the people with whom we worked, and were able to touch them, in their here and now. Bringing to the encounter our longing to ease their suffering, we accompanied them on a subtle interior journey into their body and souls. We took our peacefulness and invited them to come into contact with theirs. We got them to feel themselves from inside; to be calm and, rather than running away or fidgeting from right to left, to feel their breath, the faithful friend that accompanies us for as long as we live: to find support in the breath, rather than to forget that it is there.

The responses of all the women in the seven groups with which we have worked are amazing. They have surpassed all our expectations. These women, who had never before sat quietly to listen to themselves or their breathing, were able to sit in meditation for 10 to 30 minutes, depending on the nature of the group. Afterwards, they shared what they had experienced. Almost all said that it had given them a feeling unlike anything they had ever known. Some of them cried, and all requested that we would continue to meet with them.

The groups are from various backgrounds. One group inhabits a shelter for battered women from all around the country. Another group comes from Um al-Fahem, a large Arab town. They feel that it is difficult to cope with the pace of life around them or the running after illusions. They said their belief that more money and a larger house would bring an increase in happiness had been proven false.

Another group was made up of women from the Arab village of Arara who are active in social and educational activities. In

addition to their own suffering, they encounter the suffering of others, while trying to support and empower women and families. They said that their energy reserves were empty and they desperately needed to rest and recharge themselves.

One of the most amazing reactions came from a group of mothers of autistic children. Experiencing, as they do, mountains of suffering, combined with physical and mental exertion, they thirst for a little water, for a small corner of quiet, but have no time even to think about this. Just to sit down and feel their breathing had a wonderful effect on these women.

A group of professional women from the village of Baqa'a, who all manage successful private businesses reported that they feel they are buckling under the pressures and unbounded expectations from both their work and family environments. One could see the pressures on these young women in their faces and absent smiles. Basma, from this group, told us that we had arrived just in time, when her last bit of oxygen had run out.

We gave a session for women in the predominantly Druze village of Julis. One of the participants, Amira, told us after the session, "I never imagined that a little peace could awaken such a wonderful feeling." She continued, "something big happened to us today—we must not lose it but continue."

Women in the groups who had had a little experience with meditation or similar practices outside of their home environment said that they could never have imagined a day when they would sit and practice in Arabic, in a group where all the participants are Palestinian. Said one, "Usually I sit and participate in groups of Jews and it is all done in Hebrew. It's completely different to experience this in my own language. I feel so at home."

One of the most difficult sessions took place in a women's shelter. The women were young, but had terrible stories of vio-

lence and sexual abuse. Many of them had gone against the will of their families in making decisions about their lives, such as choosing a partner from another religion. Some even felt that their lives were threatened. After a few minutes of silence, these women had harsh physical reactions, such as suffocation, pains in the back and shoulders, breathlessness, and crying. We lifted them out of the quiet session very gently, embraced them with comforting words and listened deeply to each of them. That meeting took longer than planned. The social worker at the shelter was so impressed that she asked us to arrange permanent sessions with these women, at intervals of between two weeks and a month.

Sahar, a social worker in Um al-Fahem, told us that a group of staff members of the family centre also wants us to start activities for them, and a second group of women whose husbands are suffering from mental sickness also awaits us. After a preliminary meeting at this centre, the staff is convinced that our method of mindfulness practice will be suitable and very efficient.

Each time we complete a meeting we feel very thankful that we are able to do this work. Our schedules are filling up and the demand is great—we almost think we are dreaming. And we do have a dream. Taghrid says, “In my mind’s eye I see a day when we will be able to establish a centre, a home for our work. And from this place, we will be able to help people experience the treasures of mindfulness and awareness, and the practice of deep listening to the self and the other.”

In our work, we suited our words to our actions. We wrote a prescription that our people would find familiar and friendly, rather than strange to them. Thich Nhat Hanh is our teacher in this. His words echo in our head and continue to encourage us in our search for the most suitable and comfortable way to penetrate the hearts of our participants. And this seems to be working. People who have taken part ask

me, “how can it be that for so many years I wasn’t aware that something as simple as awareness of my breathing could make such a big difference in my life.”

We are only at the start of our journey. Sometimes I cry from happiness. We feel that it is the women we have met who support and empower *us*. Now, we are thinking in several directions. We flow according to the doors that open before us. One such door opened when the manager of a school for autistic children heard the responses of the children’s mothers, for whom we had conducted activities. “What did you do with them in such a short time?” he inquired. He has already invited us for a series of meetings, asked us to work with his professional staff, and promised to speak with managers of similar institutions.

Finally, I am reminded of all the good people I met in Plum Village, the nuns and monks, visitors, members of our family groups each time on each of my visits. I remember their support and love and want to tell each of them how we have managed to apply what we learned from them.