

# Amazing Grace

By Gwen Gordon

Redemption is not something you hear much about in Buddhist circles. After all, it is at its roots a thoroughly Judeo Christian concept. The Catholic encyclopedia tells us that, “Redemption is the restoration of man from the bondage of sin to the liberty of the children of God through the satisfactions and merits of Christ.” You can’t have redemption without sin and sin’s a tough pill to swallow for any Buddhist.

Instead of the concept of sin, the Buddha proposed the idea of unskillfulness. It’s not a sin to covet thy neighbor’s wife, blow up a house, or massacre a village, it’s just really, really unskillful. In Buddhism, there’s no God to punish or redeem unskillfulness, but that doesn’t mean you get away scott free either. Not with karma on the beat. As fundamental and intransigent as gravity, karmic law insures that everything that goes around comes around. With the law of karma you don’t need a criminal justice system, or a punitive God, there’s already always perfect justice built right into the cosmos. Everything you do, say, or even think simply ripples in every direction, eventually, if not immediately coming back to you in some way, shape, or form. The universe is so sensitively, interconnectedly attuned, every molecule and event co-arising within a web of mutual causality, that, well, basically we do unto ourselves precisely what we do unto others, like it or not.

Years ago when I lived in an Ashram, I learned about the Hindu “do’s” and “don’ts” called the Yamas and Niyamas. Along with the Buddhist precepts, they’re the

closest thing you get in the east to the ten commandments. When I asked my teacher what happens if you don't a "do" or do a "don't," he said one consequence is that you become agitated, making it difficult to meditate and realize your true nature. In other words, a serial killer finds it very difficult to sit and watch his breath after a murder spree. It's simple and practical; if you want to become enlightened, killing people is a very bad way to go about it. This practical focus on enlightenment can seem disturbingly amoral to a Westerner who grew up eating Judea/Christian ethos for breakfast every morning. It feels cold and austere. It's difficult to let go of the poignant beauty of redemption stories.

And after all, redemption stories are extremely compelling. Not to mention, they make the best songs. I belt out Amazing Grace at full volume in the car at least once a month. It never gets old, and neither does the story of a slave driver who becomes a liberator. It touches the part of me that feels lost, not unskillful, and is hoping to be found, not have a good meditation. It appeals to the fantasy of being lifted to a holy realm of radiant goodness where everything I say and do adds to the beauty of the world, where I never fart in public or have a bad hair day. It's hard to resist this fantasy and it often kicks in around the holidays.

Mine started around Thanksgiving. Let's just say I had a difficult week. On the Monday before thanksgiving, I hit a pedestrian while I was driving a borrowed car. I was going so slowly, it was more like a drive-by shoving, than a "hit." Nobody got hurt, but it shook me up and ended up causing insurance mayhem. The next day, while I was picking apples to make apple crisp, I stepped in a wasp's nest. A few kamikaze wasps flew right up my overalls and into my shirt stinging with abandon, while I ran around yelping and ripping my clothes off. I ended up with twelve big pink welts from neck to ankles. The

next day made the wasp stings look like diaper rash. It was the pre-Thanksgiving family meal and my sister and I had one of the worst blowouts of our lives.

I was moving slowly that morning, edgy and in shock, wasp stings throbbing while I made the apple crisp. I got to my sister's house late - an hour late. She greeted me with a snarl, muttering something about holding everything up. I clenched. By the end of the meal, we were completely avoiding each other. It wasn't until after most of the guests went home that the time bomb exploded. The last thing I remember as I stormed out of the house was spitting out a scathing, "You're MEAN!" That's sinking pretty low for me, and it ripped a hole in my heart. I stood outside for five minutes catching my breath. Then, with every ounce of humility and determination I could muster, I went back inside and offered a hug. It was hard, but I knew it would make the inevitable space we were going to take from each other a little bit softer. When I finally left, I wasn't sure how long it would be before we'd see each other again.

Three weeks of silence later, on the Monday that Samuel Tookie Williams awaited execution, I unexpectedly found myself driving alone to San Quentin prison to join the vigil. The short block leading up to the prison gate filled and in no time the crowd was so thick I could barely move. I looked around, but didn't see anybody I knew. Then, standing on an embankment on the side of the road was my sister. Lynn has a toddler, a husband, a house under construction, and an overall over-packed life. She was the last person I expected to see at San Quentin that night. Our eyes met, I shuffled through the crowd, we hugged, cried softly, then just sat together in silence, holding each other and sipping hot soy milk. For five and a half hours we sat like this, bearing witness to the long sad night together, both bleeding for the world and healing with each other.

Three weeks before, my sister and I had found the cracks in each other's basic goodness then drove wedges into them, pointing and sneering. By showing up for Tookie and justice that night, the cracks began to mend. Or perhaps more accurately, the illusion of cracks began to be dispelled. Did we redeem ourselves in each other's eyes by coming to this event? Does the healing made possible by a horror, whether it's cancer, a war, or an execution, redeem that horror?

Sam Tookie Williams is the poster boy for redemption. He started the Cripps gang in South Central L.A. While on death row for 26 years, he became active in preventing gang violence. He spoke out, wrote four children's books, and helped negotiate the truce between the Cripps and the Bloods. To honor his contribution, he was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize four times. One powerful speaker made the point that, if we can't recognize the possibility of redemption for Tookie Williams, then how can we, a people who stole land from the Native Americans, created wealth on the backs of African slaves, exploited Chinese workers to build our railroads so we could steal more land, took half of Mexico, and now murder more people than any other "civilized" country in the world – how can we ever hope for our own redemption? It made a lot of sense that night. The whole idea of redemption made a lot of sense that night. I needed to embrace the possibility for myself, my sister, for Tookie, and for our world. After all, what else was there to hope for?

But you can't have redemption without sin and sin doesn't go down easily. The Buddha taught that we're unskillful and hurt each other not because we're bad or sinful but because we're confused. If we could see things as they really are, we wouldn't blow up buildings or molest children. We would be kind and generous, holding each other

gently and offering warm soy milk whenever possible. He taught that we're not sinful, we're asleep, unconscious, spiritually immature. Do children redeem their countless acts of selfishness, even cruelty, by growing up? No, they just grow out of it. We grow and become conscious by learning from our mistakes and as we transform, we naturally become kinder, better citizens. The open heart is the fruit of transformation not redemption.

After the fight with my sister I was truly humbled. I meditated, explored the feelings, got present with my pain, and started healing. I saw more clearly than ever how to take care of myself so I don't end up slinging hand grenades from the back seat when I'm stressed. The fight helped me see where I get confused. As the wise man Conan the Barbarian once said, "If it doesn't kill you, it'll make you stronger." I'll add to that, if you don't resist it, it'll wake you up.

To prepare a dharma talk, I usually take out my portable dharma lens and turn it toward some confused part of my life. Pretty soon, my human fumbblings become insights which become teachings. It's like recycling, or turning poop into food, or neuroses into art. When the poop of life becomes food, is it redeemed, or is it simply following its path in the larger ecology? I've noticed that whenever I learn a major life lesson, the phone will usually and uncannily ring within a day and a friend will be on the other line grappling with the very same issue I just learned something about. It's as if life passed me a golden baton and now it's my turn to pass it on. When that happens, I know that we are not alone. We are not bad. We are not separate. Nothing is a sin and so nothing needs redeeming. We are just waking up in and through each other.

The belief in sin has caused enormous harm in our world. The Buddha might even say that the concept of sin is unskillful. Thinking of anybody as bad has never helped us or them wake up. It only makes us more entrenched and righteous about our positions and it makes our battles deadlier. As the theologian Thomas Berry said, “the greatest evil is caused by those who are trying to eradicate evil.” When we live with the concept of sin and redemption, we end up in the absurd position of deciding whether to execute somebody or award him a Nobel Peace Prize. Things get ridiculously black and white.

At the vigil, 2,000 people bore witness to the institutionalized brutality of a very confused society, but we also beheld the greatness of countless people who have been working tirelessly for justice, who walk the 40 miles from San Francisco to San Quentin whenever there is an execution, who are fighting the death penalty even when their own children are victims of murder. Everything was there. It seems that when we turn to face and be with each other in the dark, the light begins to shimmer more brightly. But we don't think of the stars redeeming the night. The night simply reveals the stars.

True redemption seems more like bringing our used cans and bottles to the manufacturer and getting 5 cents in return. We bring our confusion, and unskillfulness, our greed, hatred, and delusion back to the manufacturer and what comes back is worth every ounce of pain we endured to get there. Amazing Grace.