Mindfulness in Close Relationships

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 43:44

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It's sweet that sometimes when you teach at a place for the first time, there's a little thawing out process that happens, but I'm not feeling that so much. I actually feel like I've been here a little bit. So thank you.

The series title is "Where the Rubber Meets the Road," and I've seen the topics for a number of the talks. But tonight—mindfulness and dharma in relationships—this is really where the rubber meets the road. This is the last frontier of dharma practice.

It's not always clear what the meaning of our meditative experiences are. Different meditative traditions make sense of concentration, of samadhi, or insight in different ways, and sometimes it's hard to know how much to make of those kinds of experiences. But a real place for us to check our practice is in relationship—how our practice shows up in the relational field.

This is so fundamental because we could say that the basic flavor of the dharma is something like non-harming. And harm is, by definition, relational. So this is not some casual aspect of our practice. Our whole practice operates in the relational field. This is a worthy subject for us to reflect on, and a source of incredible delight—and I'll speak personally—humility too.

One of my main teachers, Shinzen, once characterized two maxims for our spiritual practice. He said the first was: don't fight with yourself at any level. And the second was: take feedback. He just left it there. I appreciate how central he made that relational component in our spiritual life. We can learn a lot about our minds based on how we show up in relationships.

When I first started practicing, somehow I heard—I think it was a monastic—say that their aspiration for their practice was to be safe for others. That was a kind of organizing principle. Even though I was quite early in practice, there was something that really cut to the bone for me: to become safe for others. And so naturally we turn to the relational field in seeing how we are safe for others and how we're not.

All of our practice is relevant here. The three baskets of sīla, samādhi, and paññā—conduct, concentration, and wisdom—all have a place in making relationship a part of practice.

Perhaps we can begin by acknowledging that we are deeply relational beings. We're born way too early to live on our own. Sometimes I've had the thought that our gestation period should be like twenty-five years. Sorry, moms—that's not realistic. But the truth is, this is our condition.

I heard this story of the pediatrician and psychoanalytic thinker Winnicott, who started a big conference by saying—he's known as a developmental theorist—"There's no such thing as a baby." And then went on to say, "There's no such thing as a baby without their mother." That's how fundamental the relational world is for us.

Much later theorizing and empirical data have confirmed just how deep the roots of connection and attachment are in us. The psychologist Baumeister writes: "It seems fair to conclude that human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong and seem to need frequent, affectively pleasant or positive interactions with the same individuals. And they need these interactions to occur in a framework of long-term, stable caring and concern."

It makes sense, then, that this would be a very fertile garden for our practice, given how deeply we depend on the relational field. Even in monastic communities, where there's a model of leaving one's family, of going forth, there are no communities more deeply relational than a monastic community.

The opportunity here is that our deepest grooves—the most established patterns in our minds—are evident in relationships. Sometimes these grooves are only stimulated in relationship. There are many positive, helpful grooves, but also the grooves of greed, hatred, and delusion. Those get stimulated in relationship.

When I'm single, I feel generally pretty sane. Maybe other people have this experience. Left to my own devices, without having my habits disrupted much, I think, "Oh yeah, I've really got it together." And then being in relationship reveals, "Whoa, I've got issues." The forces, the *kilesas*, the defilements arise in ways that they simply don't in other situations.

Steven Levine said the reason your family pushes your buttons is because they installed them. Maybe that's not a completely fair characterization, but these grooves are deep, and they're to be honored in a way. We could say that the forces of suffering latent in other situations can arise in the context of close relationship. I'm not speaking only about romantic relationship, but about any deep affective bonds.

The classical language speaks of latent defilements—different strands of suffering that get stimulated. And this is really, in a lot of ways, not bad news but actually our opportunity to practice, to see ourselves more clearly, to become more free, to cook our life, as one Zen teacher says. To see those pieces of our mind that are undigested, where we just default into suffering of one kind or another. It's beautiful work, and it is humbling.

Sometimes in the relational field, I feel powerless against the force of habit. Not frequently, but there are times when I feel completely propelled by habit, even though there's some clarity of mind and I know this is happening. The inertia is too strong. In those moments of feeling propelled by forces bigger than our mindfulness, these can be powerful moments of deepening our commitment to practice—to practice in a way that we don't get backed into that kind of karmic corner where the forces of craving and aversion are

stronger than the mindfulness.

So, some practices—and then looking at purifying the nature of our relationships.

It seems mundane, but I'm very inspired by the fact that Joseph Goldstein, the insight teacher, has said that he makes wise speech a cornerstone of his practice. It's definitely not the sexiest aspect of the Dharma. There are flashier ways of practicing, and maybe wise speech seems mundane. But it's helpful for me to hear that he makes it a cornerstone of his practice.

The people I spend time with, myself included, are pretty careful with speech. But there's one friend, a teaching colleague, who is unwaveringly careful with his speech. Over the years of knowing him, in intense situations, at times when it would have been very natural to devolve into harsh or divisive speech, I've just never heard him do it. The feeling this engenders in me—I didn't even realize it could be like this—but there's this deep trust in him. It's not that I was worried about him talking behind my back or anything, but seeing how unwavering he's been inspires a kind of trust. It's that safety of offering oneself as safe, offering safety to another.

Some of our practice is about getting really sensitive to the karmic feedback loop in wrong speech, in unskillful speech. Sometimes it's very obvious, sometimes more subtle, but the body will be impacted when we deviate from our own deepest intentions. It's like this in the whole of our ethical life, but specifically in our speech. We're learning to be really alive to that feedback loop.

I asked a teacher early in my practice, "How do you possibly be mindful while speaking?" And he just gave one of those Buddhist answers we don't like that much: "Keep practicing."

But I think over time, especially as we are less stimulated by the fluctuations of egoic clinging, we actually can listen more deeply to our bodies. Sylvia Boorstein says that sometimes she'll stop mid-sentence when she starts to deviate into unwise speech. It's actually a good practice. I've done this sometimes—I'll just stop. There's a little shame that comes up, because you're trying to make your point, maybe there's some anger in it. But to actually just stop, dead stop, when we become aware: "Oh, you know what? There is delusion in the view right now."

I can feel it. I don't even have to finish this sentence.

Speaking is one dimension, but then there's also listening. We all perhaps know that experience where somebody comes to us with a problem to be solved, and they become very involved in the actual content of the problem. This happened, and now this, and then we could do this, or I could do this, or I can't believe that—and we get seduced into the mode of problem solving. But sometimes, if we just stay really steady and listen in a very open way, that's actually all that's needed.

Sometimes I have to trust this, to have some confidence. The problem being described—I am not going to solve that. But sometimes that's not even actually the problem. Our capacity to listen with a mind that's

very open, where we're essentially meditating for the other person—it becomes a kind of co-meditation where we're actually helping to regulate them, to support them. A very beautiful gesture to offer to people.

As we do this, as we listen, it's like listening with the body—just very sensitive to the impact of the words on our bodies. Sometimes what responds is our emotional body, the body that moves easily with all of our environment and internal landscape. We can learn so much about what's happening between two people by listening deeply. It even feels to me like the heart of intuition is that listening. We're listening to the other, and we're listening to our bodies. There are possibilities, I think, of deeper layers of wisdom that arise from that kind of listening.

Now, usually when we think about love, we think of love somewhat tangled up with attachment—not in the psychological sense, but in the traditional Buddhist sense. These things actually get tangled up, and some of what we're doing in bringing our dharma practice to close relationship is beginning to untangle the love from the clinging.

It's tricky, right? There's a lot at stake in our relationships. We depend so deeply on others, and yet the very nature of our existence, of relationship, is that we're vulnerable. There's nothing like absolute security.

This is from a book by Stephen Mitchell, the psychologist, titled *Can Love Last? The Fate of Romance Over Time*:

"We learn to love in the context of the contrived and necessary safety of early childhood, and love seeks perpetually a kind of safety that screens out the unknown. The need to feel one knows both oneself and the other person, the need for a wholly secure attachment, is powerful for children and for adults. But in human relationships, safety and predictability are difficult to come by. We endlessly strive to reestablish that illusory sense of permanence and predictability. When patients complain of lifeless relationships, it's often possible to show them how precious the deadness is to them, how it is carefully maintained and insisted upon. Love by its very nature is not secure. We keep wanting to make it so."

I don't want to give the impression that we're supposed to continually open to impermanence, open to impermanence, open to impermanence. That's not always the right medicine. But I do think some of the suffering that arises in relationship arises as a kind of defense against the increasing risk and vulnerability of depending on another. One of the theses of this book is that boredom, in a certain way, is orchestrated to create the veneer of predictability. Some of our problems arise out of this—he doesn't use this language at all, but for me it's clinging.

In my own relationships, this arises in the form of wanting to control the views, preferences, and desires of the other. Not in overt ways, but in subtle ways of trying to enforce a certain set of views and preferences—molding the other into some image, feeling perhaps challenged by the otherness of the other.

And maybe most deeply, what I find most disorienting, is not being able to control the suffering of loved ones. We can do something, sometimes a lot, to serve compassion, to ease suffering. But ultimately that suffering—we can't govern it. For me, a lot of suffering and a lot of clinging arises in the face of the suffering of the other.

There's something desperate that gets triggered in me in seeing that—something that is definitely not compassion.

So we're learning how this clinging makes its way in, how it gets tangled up with love. Joseph Goldstein asks us to reflect: In this tangle of love, which is like giving, and clinging, which is like holding, does the clinging in any way enhance the love?

If the Dharma had—I don't like to be reductionistic about the Dharma; it has so many different aspects, and if you just march to one drumbeat, practice gets unbalanced. But if we had to take any mantra to summarize the Dharma, it would probably be *let go*.

And so letting go in this context means, in my experience, opening to the radical otherness of the partner, the parent, the child, the friend. In that there's a gesture of not knowing them, of opening to not knowing. Part of how we make things feel more secure is to know them inside out. But there's some value in that sense—maybe you know that sense of looking at somebody, maybe somebody you've known for decades, and you can still look at them and say, "I know you, and I don't know you." Or "I don't know you completely." And in that not knowing, there's a kind of openness that arises. We can meet people in a different way, appreciate their otherness, even as we feel deeply connected.

Now, you may be familiar with how the Buddha described clinging: we cling to sense pleasures, we cling to conventions, cling to views, and we cling to self-view. And at the heart of any Dharma subject, it usually brings us back to the themes of self-clinging. Nowhere is this more apparent than in relationship, where we can get a sense of how our own rigid self-definitions—all the yeses, "I am this," and all the nos, "I am not that"—impair our capacity to love and be open. Because we are all of a sudden protecting something. We are standing guard at the gates of self. And so our attention is directed towards bracing rather than opening.

Sometimes I think about Dharma practice as becoming unoffendable. That doesn't mean at all condoning harm, or delighting in insults or something. But maybe you have a sense of what it would mean to become unoffendable—to work through all of the pressure points within the self-clinging, to digest those, to let go, so that there's no longer an emotional charge with any claim about the self. And maybe you can even get a sense of how open that way of being would be. How open to another we could be, the kind of safety we could offer another. Because in that way we wouldn't be—you know, we're always exerting a certain level of egoic pressure on others. And it feels to me like weather systems of high pressure and low pressure—egoic pressure. You can feel that pushing against your being. And when we don't feel that, we're actually invited to be in a different way.

This is Chuang Tzu: "If a man is crossing a river and an empty boat collides with his skiff, even though he be a bad-tempered man, he will not become very angry. But if he sees a man in the boat, he will shout at him to steer clear. If the shout's not heard, he'll shout again and yet again and begin cursing. And all because there is somebody in the boat. Yet if the boat were empty, he would not be shouting and not be angry. If you can empty your boat crossing the river of the world, no one will oppose you or seek to harm you."

So one last thing. The other side of the coin of the teachings on not-self are the teachings, we could say, of not-other.

Somebody asked Ajahn Sumedho—I think it was a young monastic, asking a senior abbot while preparing to go home for a holiday break. They were clearly a little freaked out about going home for the holidays as a monastic and reintegrating with their family. And so the person asked Sumedho, "How can I do this? How can I be kind to them?"

And he said, "Don't create them. Don't create them. You can be kind by not creating them."

Meaning that you don't fixate their being.

You don't pin all of their actions, beliefs, preferences, views on them. You don't hang all of that on the coat hook of their self. Because that coat hook doesn't exist.

I do find that it's possible to love people—it's still possible to love people, even in knowing this. And it's complicated. It's definitely not resolved in my own heart. There is something that wants to love their self, that wants to feel in relationship, one self to another self. But it's possible to still love even with the insight of not-self, not-other. And then our relationships really feel like Dharma. It's possible to still love, but it's increasingly difficult to hate.

Let's just sit for a moment.

Whatever feels useful, please pick up. And leave all the rest behind.

Whatever goodness arises from our efforts together tonight, may this be of benefit. May that goodness be a cause of less suffering, more joy in our lives, in the lives of all we encounter.

Thank you. Nice to be with you.

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