Self Acceptance

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:39

I'd like to talk tonight about the factor of self-acceptance in life. I mentioned a few days ago that this practice really operates on two different levels. One is the psychological—the level of our emotions, thoughts, our personality, what makes us individual. The other is the level of the spiritual, the level where we feel our connection with all life, where we find what in us is shared by all living beings, where we find that relationship to life itself.

This feature of self-acceptance, I feel, is one of the root issues in working on the psychological level and for many of us lies at the core of many of the problems that we encounter in living. So I'd like to go into this area and see where this difficulty arises, how it manifests, and how to work with it.

When we talk about a lack of self-acceptance, it's as though somewhere along the way in our lives, we've picked up a belief that if we were to express it, takes the form of something like, "I'm not okay. There's something wrong with me." This is the basic feeling when we're not able to accept ourselves fully. And it's as though we look around the world and we think, well, everyone else seems to be getting by okay, and I guess it's just me that's having this problem, this difficulty. Because what we don't realize is that virtually everyone, to some degree or another, feels that they're not okay either. And so we're all sort of not okay in the same boat, if we knew the truth of it.

But when we come to believe in this way, when we take up this view and hold on to it, subscribe to it, it's the source of a lot of conflict in our life and the ground for a lot of suffering. To some extent, it's something that we all share. I don't think there's anyone who's grown up, certainly in this sort of culture, who hasn't come away with a bit of this self-doubt, lack of self-acceptance on some level.

And so I'd rather think of it not in black and white terms. It's not a case of "Do I accept myself or do I not accept myself?" Rather, it's working with different degrees of self-acceptance. So for all of us, I think there are many ways to work with this issue wherever we're at, coming to greater and greater self-acceptance in life.

I think the universal nature of this problem is shown by the sales of a book that came out a few years ago in America. I think it's also been quite popular in England. The title of the book is *I'm OK, You're OK*. It was written by a psychologist who was interested in a type of therapy called transactional analysis. He looked at all these different combinations of how we relate to others based on whether we feel we're OK or not OK, and the other person is OK or not OK. These different combinations of interactions make up a lot of our different relationships with the world, as it turns out.

This book, which is in the field of psychology, hit the bestseller list in the United States and sold hundreds of thousands of copies. Most books on psychology sell 1,000 or 2,000, and this was in the hundreds of thousands. I think that shows that it was hitting something in people. There was a real response to that theme.

Another testimony to the universality of this problem lies in the popularity of a particular American comedian who is sort of the apostle of self-rejection. I wonder if you know who I'm thinking of? Exactly, Woody Allen. One of whose famous lines was, "I wouldn't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member."

This sense of not accepting ourselves, not accepting aspects of ourselves, comes, I think, from encountering somewhere in life, somewhere along the path of our life, some emotion that we couldn't handle. It was too strong for us. It was overwhelming. And this, I think, is why the emotional life is so central to spiritual practice. I feel that it really needs to be considered an integral part of spiritual development.

Because for many, many of us, somewhere along the way, in coming into contact with an emotion that was simply too strong for us at the time, we've stopped our growth. Our growth has been blocked in some way. It may be a feeling of fear. Maybe an insecurity in life. Maybe a feeling of loneliness that we didn't feel we could live with. Maybe a sense of unworthiness that we came across. Maybe a degree of anger that we just felt we couldn't handle, couldn't cope with.

What we have tended to do, not understanding, being young, not knowing how to work with these difficult emotions, when one came along that was too much for us, the only way we could see to keep going was to push it down, to suppress it, to try to block it from our consciousness so that we could get on with the business of living. We hoped in that way that we would become free of it, that we would get out of it.

But the difficulty is that anything that we suppress, anything that we push down into the psyche, unfortunately tends to stay on and on and on. So whatever strong emotion is pushed down, pushed under, begins to pervade our mind, pervade our being, pervade our life. So that suppression is no escape. Rather, it prolongs the particular state of mind.

When we try to suppress fear, for instance, our lives become full of fear. If we try to escape from the fact of loneliness, our lives become full of loneliness. There's a constant struggle to keep that emotion from surfacing, to keep it suppressed. And that constant struggle begins to take a lot of our energy. So we're no longer able to respond to life fully.

So the personality splits, creating a perpetual inner drama between the critical parent and the defensive child within us. This division manifests clearly in our meditation practice as well. If we cannot fully accept ourselves, how can we accept the present moment? Our experience is simply a manifestation of ourselves,

and when self-acceptance is absent, we remain in constant conflict with whatever arises. The moment is never good enough, never quite right, never feels complete. There is no peace in meditation, no rest, no natural settling, because there is always this underlying struggle with what is.

Living without a fundamental sense of our own worth creates an unbearable situation. No one can truly sustain feeling fundamentally unlikable or unacceptable. The mind simply cannot settle into such a painful self-perception. When we cannot generate this essential sense of okayness from within ourselves—when we cannot feel genuine affection for the full range of our being—we become driven to seek it from external sources.

This creates a desperate dependency on others for validation and approval. We begin organizing our lives around gaining acceptance from the outside world, constantly looking for signs that we are worthy, lovable, or acceptable. Our actions become motivated not by authentic expression or genuine response to circumstances, but by this underlying hunger for external confirmation of our worth.

This external seeking becomes compulsive because it can never truly satisfy the deeper need. Even when we receive approval or praise from others, it provides only temporary relief. The fundamental wound of self-rejection remains untouched, continuing to generate this restless searching for something that can only be found within. We become trapped in cycles of performing, pleasing, and positioning ourselves to gain the acceptance that we cannot give to ourselves.

The tragedy is that this external validation, no matter how abundant, cannot heal the split within us. It cannot restore the natural wholeness that was disrupted when we first learned to reject parts of ourselves. Only by turning toward what we have pushed away, only by learning to meet our own experience with kindness and acceptance, can this fundamental healing begin.

And so our relationships with other people revolve very much around a need and a search for affection and approval. We look for this in our friendships, we look for this in our intimate relationships, we look for it in our work situation, we look for it in school—anywhere we think that people might be able to like us or approve of us. We work very hard to convince ourselves that this validation is real, that it can be true.

Unfortunately, it never works. Deep down we believe it can't be true. Deep down we feel that we're not likable, we're not lovable, and so the message from outside that we may be likable, that someone may like us, can never really go very deep. We can never really believe in it.

So no matter how much affection, how much approval we get from outside, it doesn't satisfy this inner need. And we're committed to look for more, always looking for more. That need really can't be satisfied from outside, although we keep looking for it, keep wanting it.

Also in our relations with others, we feel we're not okay. We can't let other people see what we're supposedly really like. We can't really be honest with people because we know deep down that if you

really let them see what you're like, they won't like you.

So we build a sort of false persona, a mask. We put on our mask in the morning and we go out and we present the mask to the world, and we hope that at least maybe they'll like the mask. We know they won't like us.

In this way, we're always hiding our true selves. Living like this, we can't really come in direct contact with the world because we can't let our true self out. The risk of rejection is too high. So we always have to pretend to be something we're not. And in that, there's a great deal of strain, a great deal of effort.

There's also great risk in this approach. When we live this way, any new person we meet is a threat, because anybody we meet has the potential to see through our disguise. We always live in fear that somebody's going to come along and say, "You're just putting that on. I know you're not really like that. I can see exactly what you're like, and you're nothing like that." We're always afraid of being unmasked, as it were, of having what we think is the true side of ourselves come through. We always live in anxiety of that.

Because of this, if we can't accept ourselves, we're overly sensitive to criticism. If you really can't accept yourself, then you can't acknowledge, fully acknowledge any of your weaknesses. And we all have weaknesses. Everybody on this earth has strengths and weaknesses.

But if we really are very concerned that maybe we don't have any strengths and it's all weakness, we cover it over with this exterior that's all strengths and no weaknesses. Then as soon as someone sees a weakness, we're afraid that the whole structure is going to collapse. So any criticism becomes threatening to the whole being that we have built up, the superstructure of self-image. And we can't take it.

Generally our response in that situation tends to be defensive. If you look at your defensive responses to criticism in life, it generally comes because the whole sense of worthwhileness is getting rattled, is getting shaken—it's fragile.

In our close relationships, in our friendships and in our love relationships, because we finally found some sort of affection that we can trust in a little bit, those relationships come to be very, very important. They become like a lifeline for our emotions. Without that lifeline to love, to affection, we feel we shrivel up inside.

So those relationships become extraordinarily important, and we depend very heavily on them. And where there's dependency, there's fear. There's the fear of loss, the fear that that relationship might be taken away, and with it our lifeline, our whole source of affection.

If we don't feel good about ourselves, still on some level we really wonder how other people can feel good about us. We're sure that there are a hundred thousand more people out in the world who are much more desirable than we are. And if our friends, and especially our relationship partners, start meeting all those

people, they'll leave us like a shot. As soon as they find out what great people there really are out there, we know they'll get away from us as soon as they can.

So jealousy comes in, clinging, holding on to that lifeline.

Also, if there's a low sense of self-esteem, if we have a low regard for ourselves, people can easily take advantage of it. They can treat us in unkind ways, inconsiderate ways, and we think, "Well, that's only what I deserve. It's just what I deserve in life to be treated in this way." We at times lack the faith in ourselves to stand up for ourselves, to assert our own human rights and need for consideration in those situations.

Also frequently, with a low appreciation of our inner being, a lot of emphasis gets put on the outer. So a lot of care and attention goes into things like clothing and cars and the appearance of the house and the style of haircut and all these outer displays, hoping that the outer beauty can make up for the inner lack in some way.

These are the results, these are the manifestations of a mind that's divided, that isn't at one with itself. And they begin to percolate through our whole life to fill up almost all our relationships. Almost all the areas of our life are affected by this conflict, by this frustration, by this lack of satisfaction, where it seems that nothing can quite come right for us.

How did we get in this position? How did this arrive for us?

There are really many, many sources. And it can happen virtually at any point in our lives.

Let's take our life as very small children, as infants. I think probably almost all of us at that time got some sense of not being okay. And it's almost a necessity, being a very small child. Children come into this world with wild energy, no inhibitions. They don't know the social rules yet. So we've all done things like emptied the honey jar out on the new carpet and taken our crayons and painted all over the clean wall in the living room, or gone into our mother's closet and pulled down all the dresses and cut them up with scissors. And then we're surprised that that's not okay.

So we get these messages when we're very small that the things we're doing aren't okay. And we start to feel, well, maybe there is something wrong with me. I'm always being corrected. Maybe there is something wrong. And, of course, our parents seem like the ones who are really okay. Our parents are really in charge. They're in charge of the world. They can do these amazing things like walk and open doors. They can actually reach the doorknob and pull it open. They can drive cars. They can go into stores and walk out with things. Nobody stops them or shouts at them. So our parents are definitely okay. But we as little kids—there are a lot of questions about that.

Other people may have a relationship with their parents that doesn't have much love, doesn't have much affection. This is pretty common. Coming into this world, not getting affection or caring or love expressed

very openly, we come to form the view that we're not really lovable. If we were more lovable, well, I'm sure my mother would pick me up and hug me more often. I'm sure my father would give me a kiss every now and then if I were really lovable. And because they don't do those things, I must not be a very likable person. There must be something wrong with me that the world isn't being affectionate.

This is especially true if our parents tend to be very critical, as many parents do. Many adults want their world ordered just so. And children to such a world are only a disturbance, only a disruption. So some parents are always criticizing their children. Their children can't do anything quite right. If we grow up with such parents, we really come away with the feeling that we can't do anything right. Not only are we not lovable, we can't even behave properly, can't do anything right.

This, of course, is a real mistake. To ever conclude that we're not lovable is a complete mistake, because this quality of lovableness has much more to do with the mind of the beholder than it does with the mind of what or who is being beheld. In other words, the ability to love comes foremost. After that comes what it's turned toward. So there's no one on this earth who can't be loved. There's no one on this earth who isn't lovable. We begin to see that it was just the limitation in our parents' own hearts and minds that kept them from feeling and expressing that love. But we believe in it. We have believed in it.

It's interesting how this idea is starting to really filter through the whole of society. I work in Totnes, just a few miles away, in an office that's above a shop where they sell electrical goods—televisions and tape recorders and things like that. The owner of the shop was having some renovation done, so some workmen were in: carpenters and plumbers working on the bathroom in the shop. These were just very ordinary guys, dressed in blue jeans and beards. I can guarantee they weren't reading the best-selling psychology books from the United States. I overheard a conversation between two of them one day while they were working. The owner of the shop was named Adrian. One of the workers said to the other, "You know, Adrian's problem was he didn't get enough cuddles when he was a baby."

Just at that point, Adrian walked into the room, and the worker called out, "Isn't that right, mate?"

Adrian looked puzzled. "What's that?"

"You didn't get enough cuddles when you were a baby, did you?"

Adrian was embarrassed but laughed it off, saying, "Oh no, we never get enough of that. Never get enough of that."

I found it wonderfully healthy that ordinary men could joke about such things so openly. It really delighted me.

When we begin to mature and see the effects of our childhood—recognizing how our parents' treatment shaped us—resentment often arises. It's common to go through periods of deep resentment when we realize our parents weren't very affectionate, that we didn't truly feel loved, and we see the lasting marks

this has left on us. This resentment can become a driving force in our lives for some time.

I met someone earlier this year who was going through this intensely. She was a lovely person—sensitive, emotionally deep, very much in touch with herself in many ways, committed to peace work and social action. Really a wonderful human being. But she was consumed by resentment toward her parents. Because this resentment ran so deep, she couldn't open to love—neither to loving others nor being loved herself. The resentment reached to the very core of her being.

It's important to accept resentment when it arises. But at a certain point in our development, we must realize that whatever happened in the past, and whoever was at fault, the present moment is a different matter. In this present moment, there's only one person who can move us out of the situation we're in right now—ourselves.

When working with this kind of resentment, we eventually must let go of past blaming and begin taking responsibility for the present moment. No amount of blame or resentment will free us from this particular bind, this particular situation.

After working with these feelings enough and coming to some degree of self-acceptance, we may find ourselves able to forgive our parents for those hurts. At a certain point, we might even appreciate everything they've done for us.

As I've grown older and watched friends raise children—I haven't had children myself—I've begun to see the incredible amount of work involved in raising a child. Just keeping a child clean, clothed, and fed for sixteen years is a full-time undertaking. It's truly a complete job in itself. I've gained a real sense of how much my parents gave to me, how much all our parents have given us through that work.

When we clear ourselves of resentment, there can emerge a genuine appreciation for all those years of what was, in many ways, selfless giving. Even if love wasn't felt, even if we didn't perceive it clearly, those actions expressed tremendous caring. The love may have been present even when we couldn't feel it clearly.

In this relationship with our parents—or any relationship, for that matter—it's important to tune into the interplay between outer and inner that I mentioned earlier. There's a cycle that affects not only self-acceptance but many areas of our lives. It's helpful to become aware of this cycle: from perception to view to action.

Perception means noticing something in the outside world. View is what happens inwardly—we form opinions or conclusions about ourselves or the world. Action is our expression back into the world, emerging from our inner life.

Take the example of feeling unloved in childhood. We perceive the world a certain way—we see our parents as unloving. Whether they actually were is another question, but that's our perception. Instead of

letting each perception simply come and go, we tend to form conclusions about it. The conclusion becomes: "They don't love me, therefore I'm not lovable."

We hold onto this conclusion, this view, and it becomes part of our inner world, shaping our inner life. This inner view then determines how we relate to the world. If we truly feel we're not lovable, we act and relate to the world as though this will always be true.

For instance, we enter a relationship expecting rejection because our inner view tells us we're not lovable. We form friendships expecting them to end. We meet new groups expecting no one will like us.

In all these new relationships, there's opportunity for fresh perception to arise. We might notice, "That person likes me."

But that fresh perception comes into conflict with a long-held view, which is that I'm not likable. So we've got a conflict. There's the perception that someone may like me. There's the deep-held view that nobody could like me. Which do you think we give up? The fresh truth, the living truth, or the old view?

More often we toss out the fresh perception. We invalidate that feeling of affection because we're convinced, we believe that it couldn't be true. We cling to that inner view.

So it's important to see this interplay between the perception of the world outside, the view we form inwardly as a result, and then how that view conditions our behavior, which expresses itself in our outer relation to the world. There's an ongoing interplay in every area of our life, from the outer to the inner and back again. This is why people like Krishnamurti have made the comment, there truly is no inner and no outer. He says this is all one movement. All one movement.

So we come through infancy and find ourselves in school. Now, virtually every school that I've seen, except for a few alternative schools, are characterized by a real atmosphere of competition. One person is matched up against another to see who's going to come out ahead. Whether it's in academics, or in sports, or in beauty, or in popularity. Always this sense of competition.

And what that sets up is the mind that compares. We're always comparing ourselves to others. And all you have to do is meet—if you're into this comparison game—all you have to do is meet one person who's better than you, and you feel badly. One person who's better. And it hurts.

So we can say, I am not as blank as someone else. And you can fill in the blank with any positive quality that you like. I'm not as pretty. I'm not as handsome. I'm not as intelligent. I'm not as funny. I'm not as popular. I'm not as talented. I'm not as rich. I'm not as good in sports. I'm not as well dressed. I'm not as cool.

And you just meet one person who's better than you in any of those areas and you feel badly. It's crazy. Sooner or later, we always meet someone who's better than us in any area of life. And this comparison is so unnecessary.

You know, in the middle of it, we never stop to ask the question: How pretty do you have to be to be okay? How handsome do you have to be to be acceptable? So that people don't sort of run away from you when they see you coming—"Here comes that ugly man again." We never stop to see if there's any sort of real standard, which of course there isn't.

It's as though whenever we were to go look at a flower, we'd see a red tulip that's in bloom in the springtime. It's a beautiful red tulip with its brilliant colors, throbbing with life. And we'd look at it and say, "Well, the rose is really nice. I wish you were a rose. You're not quite as good as a rose." And we'd discount it.

We all are individual. We all have different expressions. We all are different expressions of life. We have unique strengths and unique weaknesses. And we all have those strengths and weaknesses. There's nobody who doesn't.

And when we compare ourselves to another through these facets—just these fragments of ourselves—we pick on a little fragment and say, "Oh, but somebody else's fragment is better than mine, therefore I'm no good." We destroy ourselves through this activity of thought, this activity of comparing.

And it's not necessary.

This message was really brought home to me in the early seventies. I was hitchhiking in California in 1973, and the hippie ideal was still in swing. That's really where it was at—basically living out the hippie dream. I was hitchhiking on a freeway when I was picked up by a couple who were about my age or a little older, between twenty-five and thirty. They were clearly not taking up the hippie dream, and as far as I was concerned, this couple looked like they could have come from another planet.

They were driving this old Ford Falcon convertible that was about fifteen years old at the time. It was sort of falling apart—the paint was really chipped, some chrome was falling off, and the fender was dented. The couple were not of the standard conforming to the image of beauty or handsomeness. They were the sort of people in my high school who probably wouldn't have gotten dates to the senior prom. They were both quite overweight. The fellow had on a set of old overalls and a cowboy hat. Their car wouldn't go over about fifty miles an hour. We're on a California freeway and everybody's whizzing by us at seventy in these brand new Fords and Lincolns, and he was pottering along at fifty miles an hour in a car that sounded like it could die.

It suddenly struck me that these people had looked at the whole area of competition in life and they'd dropped out of it. They'd looked at what happened if they wanted to play that game of competition, and they'd said, "No thanks." They had gone beyond comparisons and were just living their lives. They had such a nice relationship. I had such a good time in the car with them because they were cheerful, they'd laugh with each other, you could tell there was a lot of affection between them. Having dropped out of the whole thing, they weren't obsessed with this madness of living up to some phony kind of standard. It was

a really beautiful contact, actually, and a real lesson for me.

If we survive our infancy and childhood and school, then we come to the stage of young adulthood. This is the time in life where we have about three months to go from being a kid to being an adult. Remember that period? One minute you're being taken care of by mom and dad and everything's provided, and a few months later you're supposed to be completely on your own and a grown-up.

Within a few months, you really may have to enter the field of employment. You're supposed to go out and support yourself, get all the money you need to live. And owning a car—then you have to learn about changing the oil and testing the spark plugs and what kind of petrol to buy for it. And relationship—you may move in with someone, even get married at this time. For many people, this is when you start to have children, so you become parents. Get an apartment on your own, get your own flat, and start to learn to cook for yourself. All this goes on within a few months. You're supposed to make this transition just like that, overnight. Not so easy.

That can be a very rocky patch of life, that particular bit of growing up. A lot of us get sort of a few dents in the old self-image about that time. I remember when I was twenty-one, I got into my first serious relationship. I was leaving university, and a woman and I decided to live together. It was a disaster. First time I tried to live with anyone, it was a disaster.

Relationships are great. They can really bring out the very best sides of ourselves. When we're in love, we just see absolutely the nicest parts of our personality unfolding moment after moment for a while. And then the process of falling out of love may take place, and then we see just the worst parts of ourselves. I was amazed at what came out for me in that relationship. It took me a long time to get over it, basically.

Someone said that self-knowledge is no good news. That's the way I felt in that period. I'd seen sides of myself that I didn't know I was capable of, and it shook me quite deeply, actually. It took me about a year to kind of get over having seen those parts of myself.

So if we make it through young adulthood, we start to find some maturity in life. And it's very helpful, but it can be a source of more difficulty. We start to see that there may be a way to live without so much self-centeredness. We start to discover some of our human potential. We start to have experiences for shorter or longer periods of time where we're free of a sense of conflict, where there's a real sense of well-being, being deeply in tune with life, and we feel what it would mean to live with clarity without being so self-centered, without being angry or uptight.

And these are wonderful insights. Very important to contact these sides of ourselves. But the trouble is, we can easily, so easily, turn these into new ideals. And then we begin to compare ourselves to the new ideals and think things like, "Well, I should always be loving. I should always be open. I should always be completely generous and giving." And it's not very realistic. And this is where the should-be comes in and forms a conflict. And basically we compare ourselves between what we feel we are in this moment and

what we feel should be.

And of course this can come in in our meditation as well. When we're given a goal like meditation on the breath, we can easily take up the idea, "I should be with the breath all the time." And if we have that ideal—I should be with the breath 100% of the time—none of our meditation periods are going to be satisfying. Anytime we're not with the breath, we feel we're not doing well enough.

So we have to let go of that ideal in the breathing meditation, that we're supposed to be there all the time, and just be with the reality of it. Sometimes we're with the breath, sometimes we're not. When we're with the breath, then awareness is being developed. And whatever we do in that situation is actually fine. We do as much as we can and that starts the meditation working. No need to compare it to an ideal.

So we need, all along the whole spiritual path, to balance some degree of critical awareness, some degree of judgment, with a degree of acceptance. Most of us would never even start on meditation or self-knowledge if there wasn't some degree of goal for it, if we didn't have some degree of ideal that we wanted to move toward—a degree of being more open, wiser, a more loving sort of person. So that goal propels us along the spiritual path.

At the same time, to keep moving with some degree of harmony, there has to be acceptance of the reality of this moment, acceptance of what is. So this interplay, this dynamic between the goal and the reality is sort of an ongoing seesaw in walking the spiritual path. And you have to acknowledge and work with both halves of it—both the ideal and the reality.

And so then we may think, "Well, we've got life sort of sorted out. We've come into our maturity. We're working with ideals." And then we become aware of the process of aging. And self-acceptance can move on to the physical level, concerned with the physical.

One morning about our mid-30s, we sort of wake up and look in the mirror and we realize, "Hey, I'm not young anymore." And then how does that feel? So much emphasis is placed on youth and the idea that beauty really goes with youth and not with age.

I don't know if you've really taken a look around cosmetic shops and seen how many of the things that are on sale there have to do with aging—all sorts of creams and lotions and potions to take away wrinkles and make the skin young and soft, and colors to dye the hair, to hide the streaks of gray or whatever. Even special—I know there's this chain in England called The Body Shop. It's all natural ingredients, so it's very good. It hasn't been tested on animals, so it's very good to buy there. And they have a special lotion designed for these wrinkles around the eye, which are called crow's feet in English, because they're like the feet of a bird. So there's a special lotion you can get for the wrinkles around the eyes at these shops.

And we may look in the mirror one morning and notice that, hey, the stomach's getting a little more rounded than it used to be. When did that come in? All these different signs of aging. And if it's not the stomach, it's the hair. The gray hair starts to come in, as you may have noticed.

And this really came home to me a couple of years ago. I went to a seminar at Amaravati, this Buddhist monastery up near London, and some speakers were giving talks on the theme of Buddhism and social action. And I listened to the talks, and afterwards a few of us were sitting around discussing what the speakers had said and the idea of Buddhism and social action. I was giving my comments on various speakers and their themes. And then I got up and walked off. And there was a fellow, I didn't know, who was sitting next to my wife, who was on my right.

And after I'd walked off, he turned to my wife, Sally, and said to her, "Who was that man?"

And she said, "What man?"

And he said, "That middle-aged man who was sitting on your left."

It was only a couple of years ago. I didn't realize I'd gotten there so quickly.

And if your hair's not going gray, it's probably falling out, right? The other thing we men face. I had a good friend who was almost totally bald when he was about twenty-eight. By that age he just had a little fringe left around here—a little blonde fringe. Fortunately, he kept his sense of humor about it. He said the hardest thing about being bald was when he washed his forehead in the morning, he never knew where to stop.

So there's no retirement from this self-acceptance work. It can strike at any age, any time.

How do we work with it? How do we get through this difficulty, this lack of self-acceptance?

The first and most important thing is the quality of awareness. Bringing awareness to the situation and seeing where we come up against this feeling of self-rejection, how it manifests in our life, where it came from, how it makes us feel, and so forth. When we begin to see how it influences us, when we begin to see how the mind reacts to that sense of not being worthy or not being loved, then we start to understand its mechanism. And when we start to understand it, we can get to some degree free of it. We understand our motives and our reactions to life. We begin to understand this interplay between the outer and the inner and our own responsibility in that play. We stop seeing ourselves just as victims of circumstance.

In addition, I think it's important in life to find ways to develop a sense of joy. Basically, this means finding things that bring you pleasure, finding things you like to do—but don't depend so much on other people to fill you up. Find things that you yourself like to do, possibly alone.

Many people have hobbies that they've really been into for a while, and often we let those slip away. We say, "Well, my life's too busy. I don't have time for that anymore." But in giving those things up, we really give up an important source of nourishment for ourselves. I feel it's important for us to find those activities that really bring us pleasure, whether it's painting or music or cycling or walking in nature. So many things to get involved with. And if you don't know of anything, look around, take some classes, try a few things out. Look to cultivate that sense of enjoyment in life.

Also, keep in mind your strengths and your talents. Don't forget the good sides of yourself. We all have lots of strengths, lots of good points. But when we're caught up in self-doubt, we only look at the negative side of ourselves. So easily, thought can just dwell on one tiny part of the picture, and we forget about all the rest. So don't forget about that. Keep in mind what you're good at, where your strengths are.

Something else I feel can be very helpful in working with a sense of unworthiness is service to others. Often our psychological problems can make us self-absorbed. All our energy and all our thoughts and all our activities can revolve more and more around myself, me, myself, and I. This becomes a kind of self-enclosing circle, and in many ways, the noose can just get tighter. It's important to begin to see beyond that cycle.

One way of doing it—very, very helpful—is to work in a way that helps others. It can be through your livelihood, whether you work as a nurse or counselor or therapist, physiotherapist or whatever. It can be through volunteer work. Almost everywhere that I know of, there's plenty of need for volunteers to help with old people or disabled people—many different kinds of needs in the community. Being able to give to others, finding that one actually has something to offer to others, really gives one a sense of contributing, a sense of making a difference. It can offset this sense of unworthiness, of not mattering.

And finally, keep up your practice. The practice in itself leads to a greater sense of harmony in life. We're working here to develop directly wholesome qualities of mind like attention, like oneness of mind, like equanimity, openness, loving-kindness, and so forth.

All these wholesome qualities of mind, as they come through more and more in the meditation, start to be felt and experienced in our life. There's already a growing sense of well-being, greater sense of harmony in life. And this is one of the strong features of meditation as opposed to, I would say, many kinds of therapy that provides a real boost to growth and development. The practice itself will bring more harmony, will bring healing.

As that healing starts to take place and our mind starts to come together, we don't feel so divided within ourselves, we don't feel so split. Then the mind can rest within itself. When the mind's in conflict with itself over a key issue—like whether we like ourselves or not—the mind can't really settle. Always looking for some way around this problem, around this conflict. When we start to understand and heal this division, then the mind can begin to settle in itself, naturally.

This oneness of mind, this state of samadhi, doesn't have to be striven for. We don't have to exert ourselves with great effort in the breathing meditation to bring the mind together. It comes together naturally. And as that natural coming together happens, then the doors start to open for really working, really seeing on the spiritual level of life.

You may think this is a bit of a contradiction to say something like, "I must accept myself." Especially in Buddhism, which is supposed to teach you there isn't a self. How can a self accept itself when there's no

self to begin with? And somebody summed up this dilemma quite neatly when they said that you have to be somebody before you can be nobody.

Basically pointing to the fact that we have to come to an integration within the realm of the ego, on the level of self. That has to be integrated and harmonious before we can let go of it. Because without that sense of harmony, there's not the trust, there's not the faith to really let go of self. And that's what's really required in opening on the spiritual path—not a destruction of self, not an annihilation of self, but a surrender, a letting go of self. And that letting go requires a lot of faith, a lot of trust. And that trust, I feel, can only come from a mind that has healed these deep kinds of divisions.

I'd just like to close with a quote from a book called the Hsin Hsin Ming. It was written by the third patriarch of Zen, well before 1100. Hsin Hsin Ming means "treatise on the faith mind." It's a discourse on the mind that can trust. And in it, the author, the third Zen patriarch, talks about what he calls "the non-dual." The non-dual is that in life which is without a second, which cannot be compared, which is the ground of all existence, which is the unconditioned aspect in the universe. And of this he said: "The non-dual is one with the trusting mind. The non-dual is one with the trusting mind."

May all beings live with self-acceptance. May all beings live with affection. May all beings develop the trusting mind.

Thank you for listening.

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