Judging Ourselves

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 57:00

Last night Kamala talked about the hindrances, and in her talk about the hindrances there's one that has always fascinated me because it seems to play such a central role in my life: aversion.

One of the fascinating things about aversion is how many different forms of it there are. In retreat, one of the really common forms of aversion that arises is aversion directed toward ourselves. We find that there are ways that we don't like ourselves very much, we don't feel good about ourselves, and we judge ourselves. Especially in this context of silence and aloneness, these kinds of thoughts and the feelings that come with them often percolate right up to the top of the subconscious chatter that we don't often tune into, but in the silence we do.

So we start hearing thoughts that tell us things like: I'm not good enough, or I'm not smart enough, I'm not a good enough yogi, I'm not loving enough. Or I'm too critical, or I'm too neurotic. You may have a few more of your own.

This habit is based in a very powerful and deep-rooted tendency of mind that the Buddha called, in Pali, mana. Mana is usually translated as conceit, but an equally good translation is comparing. It's one of the ten fetters that bind us to samsara.

The Buddha said that it has three forms. This comparing mind expresses itself in three different modes. One is the mode "I'm better than someone else." This is the normal sense of conceit in English, which gives rise to feelings of pride and arrogance and superiority.

The second mode of conceit or comparing is the thought "I'm worse than" or "I'm inferior to." This is the source of a lot of suffering because basically we don't really want to be inferior to anybody. The ego wants to be the king or queen of the world. So this is a painful form of thinking or belief.

But there's a third form of comparing which says "I'm equal to." This is kind of a shock in the West to think that "I'm equal to" is also a form of conceit or comparing. Our society is so steeped in democratic ideals that we take that as a gospel truth. As the Constitution said, all humans are created equal, so I must be equal to everyone else. But in fact, this is also a projection of mind. It's an attempt to define ourselves and a projection onto reality. The sense of superior, inferior, and equal don't exist in the intrinsic nature of things. These are concepts and projections.

The source of this comparing mind seems to be something very fundamental to human existence because it's so common and so deep-rooted. I believe that it lies in an existential insecurity that we all feel. Whether we are conscious of it or not, I believe that at different points in our development, we all got the

sense that the world is essentially open and unbounded and unfixed. Somewhere that came through. We talk about the unreliability of phenomena. I think we know it on a really deep level, and it's the source of our basic insecurity in life.

So in this situation of no fixed security, I think that we have tried to find security through this root of the comparing mind. It's as though we have an intuitive knowledge that I am not solid enough. That's an unsettling proposition. So I believe that we look around, and looking outside of ourselves, it looks like everybody else is much more solid. You may notice that in the meditation hall. It seems like everyone else is sitting like a Buddha, but for me. So I think we project a kind of solidity externally. Everybody else seems so together, such consistent yogis, so calm. The turmoil is in here.

Well, maybe if I reference myself to them, I'll find some solidity. This may be the source of that instinct to compare, to find a seeming security through a reference point outside of ourselves. So this comparing mind is rooted in fear and insecurity.

This particular fetter, the Buddha said, is not ended until arahantship. This tendency to form self by comparison will be with us for a long time. So it's very helpful to get familiar with the way that it works and how to work with it in practice.

This becomes a painful tendency of mind when we believe in it, when we believe that our overall value as a person can be summed up in this superior or inferior attitude. The superior side seems to offer some comfort, but the problem is because it isn't really true, it can always be undermined. So if we've clung to that view, we have to hold on and protect it. If we've fallen into the opposite view, the view of inferiority, then we are constantly feeling down on ourselves, undermining ourselves, criticizing ourselves. The view of equality is much less problematic. It doesn't really come up a lot as a cause of suffering.

So it's just to be aware when that projection is going on as well.

This is a statement from the commentaries that will give you a sense of how central this tendency of conceit is viewed in the tradition: "The world, enveloped in the darkness of the defilements, is covered by seven veils—lust, hatred, delusion, conceit, views, ignorance, and immoral conduct. Having removed these veils, the Buddha abides generating light all around."

So this factor of conceit or comparing is in quite rich company here, elevated to the same status as lust and hatred and ignorance. It's a very central part of the mind.

When we form these beliefs about ourselves, this could be a type of what's called personality view—forming a conclusion about ourselves and clinging to it as a false kind of security. It's one of the more painful kinds of views that we can form, views particularly about ourselves. It comes out of ego, it strengthens ego, and it's a painful place for ego.

When we judge ourselves, we judge ourselves on different criteria. Sometimes we get embarrassed about

our mind. This happened to me when I first read about Buddhism. I was about nineteen years old, in university, and the only books I could find at the time were by Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki. So I started reading all that I could find, mostly on Zen at that time.

The writings tended to be quite idealistic. They really centered on the nature of the enlightened mind—the Buddha's mind or the mind of the Zen masters, both ancient and modern. They presented the picture of these minds that were completely unruffled by any external circumstance, that always abided in freedom—no problems whatsoever, no untidy emotions, no reactive thoughts, no inner problems or conflict.

As I read this literature and got so inspired by it, I took it very idealistically. I thought that I should measure up to that kind of ideal myself. Never mind that I hadn't done any practice. Never mind that I wasn't anywhere close to enlightenment. I just thought I should be emotionally clear. I began to suppress the troublesome emotions that came up in me. That led to a deadening cycle for me until I encountered actual practice and some people who could put those emotions in a bigger context.

Don Juan, the teacher of Carlos Castaneda, had a teaching on this subject that I like. I don't have the exact quote, but it was something like: "You started out trying to convince yourself that you didn't want anything, but it ended up that you couldn't enjoy anything." That's the kind of deadening that can happen from this kind of idealism, where we think we should measure up to some archetypal way of being, but we're not really there yet.

So in dharma practice, it's always good to be skeptical about any ideal about how you should be feeling. There is no way that you should be feeling. The emotional life is so wide and so varied, and it's all fine. It's all just expressions of our nature. The only guidelines, the only "shoulds" within the path are around conduct. It's helpful to refrain from unskillful conduct. But leave the mind wide open to feel whatever is there.

Sometimes we're embarrassed about our minds, sometimes we're embarrassed about our bodies. I think this is especially difficult for women in this culture, although it's becoming more that way for men. I don't know if you've tuned into that, but the images of male beauty are also starting to pervade the media—the six-pack abs, the big biceps, and so forth. But women have had to deal with this for a lot longer.

There's a lot of influence through Hollywood, through television, through advertising—essentially through the media—where one's self-worth gets identified with one's physical appearance. Unless you look like Meg Ryan or Halle Berry or Lucy Liu, you're not okay, not good enough. Never mind all the work it took to get them to look the way they do in films.

Oprah Winfrey has a real interest in transformation, and I really appreciate a lot of the spirit of her work. In her magazine O, a couple of years ago, she did an exposé of the cover girl image. What she allowed to show in the pictures was the way she looked before makeup, the makeup process, and the way she looked

after makeup in getting ready for a photo shoot for the magazine cover. I thought that was very brave of her, because when she's in public on her TV show and in the magazine she looks great—she doesn't look her age, she looks very elegant and well turned out. But in this spread she showed the before pictures.

It was very interesting because she looked like a pretty typical middle-aged woman. And then at each step—the makeup, the hair stylist, and the clothing—all of a sudden she looked like a Hollywood personality. So what do we compare ourselves to? Usually it's the cover girl or cover boy. It's not the before shots because we don't get to see those. So it's misleading from the very beginning, and then we compare ourselves to a false ideal.

So in working with the judging mind, it's really helpful to have some faith that this self-judgment, which can be so entangling, is just a mental creation. It is not the way things are.

The Dalai Lama's response reveals something profound about how this self-judgment operates. It's not the truth of things. As the Buddha taught: "When any practitioners, on the basis of form—the body—which is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change, regard themselves thus: 'I am superior,' or 'I am equal,' or 'I am inferior,' what is that due to apart from not seeing things as they really are?"

This whole movement of conceit based on our appearance is not seeing things as they really are. The Buddha then applies the same teaching to the other four aggregates, the mental formations. We could say the same thing about mind states. When we compare ourselves on the basis of our mental states and declare ourselves superior, equal, or inferior, the Buddha asks: what is that due to but not seeing things as they really are?

Our practice of vipassana is precisely to see things as they really are. We need to trust that when we can do that, it cuts through this web of comparing. It cuts through the web of conceit. All this tangle of judgmental thinking is completely off the mark, pervaded with delusion.

The Dalai Lama came to IMS in the late 1970s and gave a public talk here. This was before he became quite so famous, though even then he had a police escort out to the center. That was the first time the chief of police of Barre really gained some respect for us—he got to provide an armed escort for an international dignitary, which kind of put us on the map in his mind.

After the Dalai Lama's talk, he took questions from the audience. Someone asked him about self-judging: "I feel so worthless in my life and in my practice. I feel like I don't really amount to anything. What can you tell me about how to work with that?"

The Dalai Lama gave a very direct answer. He looked the young man in the eye and said simply: "You are wrong." He doesn't contradict people very often, usually trying to find the germ of truth in what they're saying, but he said clearly: "You are wrong. That is not the way it is. Everything that appears on this earth, every being that appears, has value and is precious. The birds, the creatures—how could a human being not have that preciousness?"

In the Tibetan tradition, they often teach the concept of precious human birth—how fortunate we are to be in this body, to have the chance to hear the Dharma. They teach this before they'll even talk about suffering, so that when suffering comes, there's this beautiful container to hold it in, a container that values every single living being, every single practitioner.

This wasn't the last time such a question arose for His Holiness. Years later, probably in the 1990s, there was a meeting in Dharamsala, India, at his home, between Western teachers of Buddhism and the Dalai Lama. The Western teachers raised this as a persistent issue: "Your Holiness, there are many people who come to us, who meditate, who are plagued by these feelings of worthlessness, of not valuing or appreciating themselves. How can we help them work with this?"

The Dalai Lama turned to his translator and asked, "What are they talking about?" He had to have the translator go back and forth several times with the Western teachers because he really couldn't wrap his mind around this concept that people would feel their lives were not of value. Finally, when he understood, he went around the circle to each Western teacher asking, "Is this part of your experience? Can you relate to this?" And each teacher said yes, they could relate to it as part of their experience.

I think there's a real epidemic of worthlessness in the West. Our communities have broken down, our traditions have fallen apart. In our generations, we're really struggling to find our way and put ourselves back together in a way that traditional societies haven't had to do. This is new work that humans are doing, and it's really widespread.

I ran into this early on in my own practice. As I mentioned, the solitude and silence can tend to bring it out. I was on a retreat, and during walking meditation, I started to feel this self-judging reflected in my thoughts. I wasn't very comfortable with it—I was embarrassed by the fact that I was judging myself in this way.

So I went to my next interview with my teacher. He asked how things were going, and I said, "Well, I'm having some hindrances." I thought we could quickly move past that and get on to some real dharma. But he was persistent.

He said, "Oh, what kind of hindrance?"

I said, "Well, I'm having some aversive thoughts."

I thought that would take care of it, right? I named the hindrance and we would go on and talk about some real dharma. But then he said, "Well, what are the thoughts?"

And I had to say, "Well, I'm feeling like nobody likes me. Feeling really lonely and unlikable."

And he could tell that I was really feeling it. This was not just a superficial chatty conversation. He could feel the pain of it. And so he sat up very straight and he said, "What you're seeing is not the way it is. Your problem is that you don't accept yourself."

And that was mostly the end of the interview. Your problem is that you don't accept yourself.

So that theme of accepting myself became my koan for the next few years. I really didn't know what it meant because I thought in Buddhism there was no self. How can I accept myself when there isn't one? There's not a self to accept or reject. So I had to struggle with it. I thought, am I supposed to find this little guy that's deep inside me and then embrace him? Is that what's supposed to happen? I couldn't do that. Never got a hold of the guy.

And so continuing to just hang out with that question, what I came to see is that accepting ourselves really means that we accept each moment of our experience just the way it is. And it's okay that it's that way. So we do this work of acceptance moment after moment after moment when we can be with the way things are with equanimity, with some ease.

It's one reason that you often hear us say, just open to the moment, feel it directly, accept it. Accept what's happening in the mind, accept what's happening in the body, just the way it is. Acceptance doesn't mean that we have to do something active. Sometimes that's a little misleading. Then we can get into the kind of, well, how do I actually accept?

What we really mean by accept is stop resisting. Just drop the resistance to it. Drop the aversion to it. That's all you need to do. You don't have to actually do anything positive. It means to drop the resistance to your inner experience.

It also doesn't mean that you have to accept the world outside, a world that you may have been hurt by or victimized by in many different ways. It doesn't mean that we condone the harm that's going on in the world. It's very appropriate, once you engage in life again, to take action to right the injustice, to right the harms that are happening in the world where it's possible. But in this context, the inner work of acceptance means we stop resisting the experience in our hearts, the experience in our minds, the experience in our bodies. Because as long as we resist it, we're just creating more conflict. It's to take out that element of resistance in the inner life.

Looking back on my experience with those years of working with self-acceptance, I see now that at the time I thought I was unhappy because I wasn't loved or I wasn't lovable. But now I think what was happening is that I was making myself unhappy by thinking those thoughts and believing them. So the source of the unhappiness was confused. But those thoughts created a weight, created a burden in my mind.

And this kind of self-judging can be very oppressive. It's got aspects of several of the hindrances. There's the quality of disliking, first of all. We're disliking something about our experience. There's an element of fear because we're afraid that it's true. We're afraid that the judgments are true and we're afraid that other people are going to see it and see this dark secret of ours, of our inadequacy. There's an element of self-doubt. We doubt our ability to handle what we're feeling. We doubt our ability to grow beyond it. We

doubt our ability to be free of it. And there's also within it a fixed view because we believe in this fixed concept about ourselves. So we're caught in all those forms of hindrance.

Underneath the thoughts, the basic feeling is something like, "I'm not good enough, I'm inadequate, I'm not lovable, I'm not worthy of love," or that there's something wrong with me. The rest of the world looks okay, but there's something wrong with me. I can feel it.

So to offset it, we often engage in a lot of searching for validation from outside. You can see that in relationship—a kind of craving for affirmation or attention, for validation. Even in retreat this can come up.

When I was in the early years of my practice, I was very self-conscious about my walking meditation. I was very diligent with my walking. I tried to do it really well, but I was also wondering if anybody else was noticing. I sort of kept hoping that somebody would someday compliment me on my walking practice. At the end of the retreat, that somebody might come up and say something. Finally, at the end of one retreat, somebody did. They came up and said, "Boy, you did a lot of walking in this retreat, didn't you?" That was as close as I ever got to a compliment.

But the problem is that even if we do get the outside affirmation, it doesn't fill the hole. It doesn't erase the doubt because we've created the view. We really are the author of that view, and we believe in it. So we really believe it's true even if people outside tell us that it's not true. Even if people tell us that we're lovable or lovely or beautiful, we can't quite take it in.

Of course, we want everybody to love us, to provide that validation, but it doesn't happen like that. It doesn't happen like that for anybody. As the Buddha said, praise and blame always alternate. These are worldly conditions that always go back and forth. I think of the Dalai Lama as one of the most lovable beings in the world, and yet there are people who do not like him.

A friend of mine teaches English as a second language in Berkeley. Some of her students are from mainland China and have been in this country not so very long. She said that she was teaching a group of them and would bring up the Dalai Lama as an example of a great person or a lot of love or a lot of compassion to try and slip a little Dharma into her English teaching. She said that she would see that these students from mainland China would kind of bristle when she would mention the Dalai Lama. And finally, one of them raised her hand and said, "Oh, you know, teacher, he is not a very good man. He is a separatist. He's a splittist." And then she understood that they had heard the news from the Chinese government that's very, very critical of him because of his political defense of Tibet and Tibet's autonomy.

So a lot of people in the world hate the Dalai Lama. I think that's probably true. That's probably a fair thing to say. So even someone like the Dalai Lama is not loved everywhere. But my friend said that over time, she tried to talk more and more about how his image had become formed that way, and these students of hers started to warm up to him and could see that there was goodness in him.

Even the Buddha was not universally loved. That seems hard to understand, but it's true—he aroused a lot of jealousy. A lot of people were jealous of his strength, of his power, of his wisdom, of the following that he attracted. His cousin tried to kill him, essentially, out of jealousy. Some people were threatened by his popularity, the way Jesus' popularity threatened some of the vested interests of his day. And some people just didn't connect.

There's a very interesting story. Just after the Buddha got enlightened and had decided to go teach, he was walking from Bodh Gaya to Sarnath, where he was going to deliver his first sermon. He passed a man on the road, and he explained to this man that he had just become fully enlightened and that he was incomparable in all the worlds in his level of understanding. The man just kind of looked at him strangely and said, "May it be so, friend," and sort of detoured around him and just kept going. You meet a lot of sadhus on the roads in India, and not all of them are very together. That's probably what he thought.

So when there's this feeling of inadequacy, of unworthiness, it can often make us withdraw from life because of the sense of fear—the fear that it's not really safe to engage in life. Because if we really engage in life, then we're subject to criticism, we're subject to failure. The reason that criticism and failure take on so much weight with this inadequacy is that they re-stimulate this inner feeling. It's not that it's a bad thing to fail. It's not that it's such a bad thing to be criticized.

Everyone gets criticized. Praise and blame always alternate. The problem is that the criticism or the failure tends to trigger this deep feeling of inadequacy and bring it to life. And then we're right back in the thick of it, which can be a terrifying place to be. It exposes this inner void or emptiness—a carryover of that primal insecurity.

We've defended ourselves. We've found ways to defend ourselves against feeling the rawness of this insecurity. But criticism or failure tends to reignite it in its strong form, that primal form. We're afraid to feel it because we believe it might be true. We believe there might be something really missing in us or something really wrong with the way that we're put together.

As confidence grows, we find out we can feel that feeling of inadequacy and it's not so crippling. We see it's just another emotion. It arises, it persists for a while, and it passes away. It actually doesn't mean that we're inadequate. It's just a gut feeling, just a sense. As we get more confidence, we can open to it, feel it, let it arise and pass, and it's not so disturbing. There's more equanimity around it.

So how can we work with this judging mind? I want to talk really practically for a while about ways to work with it in our meditation.

The first advice always, as with any hindrance, is when it arises, note it with mindfulness. Note the presence of the judging thought. Note any emotion that comes as a result of the feeling. You might develop a label for this pattern of thinking: "judging, judging." Then tune in and see what the feeling is within. See if you can feel it in the body. See if there's any mental coloring.

In the body, you might get in touch with a sense of contraction, if it's strong. In the mind, you might notice that oppressiveness, that combination of disliking and fear that's there in judging.

Sometimes the mindfulness is enough to create a space around the judging, and it really takes the pressure off. We don't feel so caught. We don't feel so identified. It can take the suffering out just in seeing it clearly. We start to see that we don't have to get rid of all the judging thoughts—that would be more striving, more grounds for comparing. But we just need to see them clearly. Then they lose a lot of their power.

Joseph has a really nice way of deflecting the power of these judging thoughts. He said, every time you hear one, just add the phrase, "and the sky is blue." "I'm a really crummy meditator, and the sky is blue." It'll make it lighter, honest.

But sometimes this mindfulness or the simple looking at the judgment doesn't quite take away its power. Sometimes the pain of it is still really there. Then, like with any hindrance, if mindfulness alone doesn't do the trick, it's helpful to take up one of the antidotes.

Every hindrance has an antidote. For instance, with desire—let's say with sexual desire—it's considered helpful to meditate on the unbeautiful aspects of the body. With aversion, it's helpful to develop loving kindness. With doubt, it's helpful to bring in faith by reflecting on the benefits of the Dharma that you've already felt.

So I want to talk about some reflective practices that can be useful in dealing with the judging thoughts. The first is to listen really closely to what the judging thought is saying. Tune in. It may say something like, "Nobody likes me. I can't be with three breaths in a row. I'm not in the moment enough. There's something wrong with me."

With each judging thought that you've really heard clearly, ask the question: "Is that true?" Really skeptically question the thought that comes. Because what happens is that these judging thoughts may start from some rational basis, but then they can get really murky.

I work with someone who's a therapist. We were having an interview one time, and she had recently lost a client—a client had decided to leave her and go to another therapist. She reflected at the time, "Well, I just wasn't the right fit for this person. That's fine." That's easy to hear—not the right fit.

But then as she dwelt on the leaving, she thought, "Well, the problem was I didn't have enough compassion for this person. I wasn't warm enough." And then the next cycle of thinking was, "I'm really not a loving person at all." And then the final cycle was, "I've never loved anyone and no one's ever loved me." At that point, she just collapsed. That thought was too much to bear.

The first thought was very workable—oh, it's not the right fit, different personalities. But then the spiral happened and the final thought was crushing. Now what's interesting is that the final thought is really

suspicious: "I've never loved anyone and no one's ever loved me." I doubt it. That's the one that's the most painful and that really weighs on us. So question that thought. It's when it gets overblown and overgeneralized that it departs from the truth, and that's where it really hurts. It's the departure from the truth.

Something else I see is that when I compare myself to other people, other practitioners, I always compare myself to somebody who's really great at a certain quality. Have you noticed that? What, you don't have the Dalai Lama's compassion? What's wrong with you? You're really undeveloped, aren't you?

Or even here, I'll compare myself: Why don't I have Joseph's clarity? Why don't I have Carol's sense of humor? Why don't I have Kamala's heart? Why don't I have Steve's precision and energy? I always pick their very best quality. I think I should match up all along the way. What a trap—instead of honoring this beautiful array of strengths, to use it to defeat myself. Not skillful.

So take a look at these thoughts and really question them. It means to doubt the self-doubt. Doubt the doubter.

A comment like "I'm not with enough breaths in a row, so I'm not a good meditator"—that's a really misleading one. I want to ask you all: what's the right number of breaths to be with if you're a good meditator? See, we set up this bar and we compare ourselves against it, but we never really make it conscious. What is the bar? Is it five? Half? Very good. Half a breath in a row is good enough.

Or another one that's really tricky is "there's something wrong with me." Really? What? Try to find a concise answer to what is wrong with you. "There's a lot of pain." Oh, really? What's the right level of pain in a human life? What's too much? We can't answer these questions.

This whole notion of something being wrong with us is really spurious. Generally—not for everybody, but generally—we felt that at some point in our life, things were okay, and then something went wrong. So somewhere we made the transition from being okay to going wrong. And what we want to do now is make the transition from it being wrong to it being okay again.

Can it be that polarized? Can it be that on and off? Is it really possible to go from being okay to being wrong? I don't believe it is. I actually don't believe that any of us are wrong in that way. Another way I could say it is, I don't really believe any of us are broken. It's another way the feeling of being wrong sometimes comes out.

If you're broken or you're wrong, then if you're in inner work, you have to want to fix it. You have to want to fix yourself. But I question whether there's anything that's ever gone wrong in that fundamental way with anyone here. Because the fundamental nature of the universe is lawful. It's lawful. It doesn't mean that it's fair. It doesn't mean that your hurts were necessarily fair. But it is lawful in the way causes and conditions unfold in life. So to say that we're wrong means the universe went wrong somewhere. And I don't believe that.

Another way to work with these judging tendencies—this gets a little psychological, but again, if you hold it in the vein of reflective practices, it can be skillful—is to work with the sense of the judge as a sub-personality and make a separate character out of the judge. It's like the judge is one corner of your mind and has a certain way of being, has a certain personality.

So give it a face, give the judge a name, dress him up in clothes if you want, make them look silly. One of the people that I work with in California calls his judge Darth Vader. That's a great image. If you hear a female voice there, Nurse Ratched from One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest might be a good image.

Once you've made that figure, that personality out of the judge, you can send metta to that person. So try sending metta to the judge and see what happens. As you start to feel into this personality, you'll notice the judge is not a very happy character and probably could use your metta. Sometimes all that's needed to quiet the judge is that they feel some metta going in their direction.

Another thing you can do if you dialogue a little with the judge is to ask the judge to restate the criticism in a truthful way. The judge says, "Nobody loves you." And you say, "Thank you very much, Darth. Could you please restate that in a way that's really true? Because what you said isn't really true."

So these are near-term ways to work. I also want to talk about some long-term ways. The practice does make huge changes in this area.

After I'd gotten ordained in Thailand, I went to visit a monastery in Chiang Mai on my way out to a forest monastery. There was a Western monk there who'd been in robes quite a while—eleven or twelve years at that point. And I hung out with him over a couple of days. I liked him a lot. He was a big man and very full of metta, full of metta, a lot of warmth. He spoke Thai because he'd been in Thailand quite a while. The Thai people also really appreciated him a lot.

In the mornings he would meditate, sit by his pond, do his own practice. In the afternoon he would see people, and Thai people would come to him all the time. Every day he was busy in the afternoon seeing people. Everybody felt his metta.

But as we chatted a little bit about practice, he said to me, "You know, I spent the first nine years that I was in robes working through my self-hatred." Nine years working through his self-hatred. But when I met him, great heart of loving kindness. Huge amount of warmth. And it was clear he had done a lot of inner work.

The classical antidote to aversion, and so to judging also, is loving kindness. In the long term, metta practice is a great contribution to greater self-acceptance, greater self-love.

In Asia, metta for self is taught first because it's considered the easiest. But in the West, it's often the most difficult. As you do the loving kindness for yourself, it's really helpful to include some positive reflections on your own good qualities, on kind deeds that you've done, so that you have a sense as you begin the

metta of some inner goodness that you're connecting to.

Metta for the self can be difficult, but it's very important to do it if this self-judging is part of your struggle. It may not feel like much is happening at first, but just the repeated bringing of good wishes to yourself will start to change that.

It's also really helpful if you're doing metta for yourself and it's difficult to have somebody for whom it's easy—somebody like a benefactor or a friend where the affection comes in very easily. Sometimes it's not so easy to feel the juice toward ourselves. We still want to do it because it will change us over time, but the juice may come in more easily with somebody else. So do it for the person who's easy. Connect with that real feeling of liking, of affection, of love, and then kind of borrow that and come back and do the metta for yourself again. Go back and forth.

Sometimes it's really helpful to do the loving-kindness practice for yourself at an earlier age. Have an image of yourself when you were a child or a teenager. That can connect to that innocence, that vulnerability, and that purity of the child.

The other area that's really helpful in the long term is a deeper understanding of anatta, of the selflessness of things. Because we really do see that there is no self to judge one way or the other. That really becomes understood. There is no inner essence that could be superior or inferior. There's also no one who's chosen to be this way.

Before we understand anatta, I think we assume people are the way they are because they choose to be that way. We identify their personality with some core. As we understand anatta more, we see it's not like that at all. Things are just arising out of causes and conditions. That includes this body, and that includes the patterns of our personality. Those are the things we mostly identify with—the body and the personality patterns.

In Buddhism, the personality patterns are known as sankharas. This is the fourth of the five aggregates. A common translation for sankharas in this sense is karmic formations. It means the way we act through mind, through speech, and through bodily actions. This is what makes up personality.

We come to see that all the sankharas are also just arising and passing due to prior causes and conditions. There's nothing fixed within the whole flow or stream of personality. Personality is like a changing river. There are karmic patterns because of ways that we've invested our energy in the past. The sankharas arise due to grooves in the mind set up by past behavior. That's called old karma. But we have the ability to influence the karma in this new moment, and that changes the stream of personality. That's what the path is about. The path is about new karma, and that then starts to transform the whole karmic stream of personality.

So we see that nothing within us is fixed. It's all coming and going and it can all be transformed. It's empty of any kind of abiding substance or essence. There is no "I" who is there to be superior or inferior. There's

no "I" who's controlling it, who's responsible for the emotions that we feel.

Sylvia Boorstein is a dear colleague that I teach with often in California. A lot of metta in her being. She asked a student one day in one of her classes, "How are you?" And the student's reply was, "I couldn't be better." Sylvia then uses that now as a teaching.

If I ask you right now how you are, could you truthfully answer that also? You could, couldn't you? We all couldn't be better because we can't change how things are in this moment. So that's a true statement for each one of us: I couldn't be better.

I am the way past causes and conditions have brought me right up until this moment. I like that sense of things. That's the way I am. So there is no one who is responsible for that. It's just the impersonal nature of past actions that are expressing themselves in this moment.

So we don't need to identify so strongly with the way this moment is. We can't change the past. We can't change those old actions. They've already happened. But where we can influence is the present and the new karma of this moment.

Over time, with the growth of insight into anatta, with the development of loving kindness, we feel more at ease, we feel more freedom, we feel more loving, and that gives us confidence in this inner goodness. That is really what offsets the self-judgment in the long run. We even get a sense it's okay not to be perfect.

Personalities never get perfected as far as I can see. That's not the place to look for perfection. But within our Dharma practice, with our imperfect personality, we can touch a place of perfection. There is an inherent purity in this mind-body process. There is a dimension of purity that we can discover and access and touch. And then we can see the imperfection as just a part of the greater perfection of things.

You see someone like the Dalai Lama who has this deep, deep self-confidence, who can sit up in front of 10,000 people, 100,000 people, 250,000 people in Central Park and still be as playful as a child, because of this deep trust in his own goodness. And that's possible from the path.

This judging tendency feeds on our outer life, but of course then we bring it into the practice—the same tendency of mind. We criticize ourselves for the way that we undertake our meditation. We may feel inadequate in the meditation the same way we feel inadequate in daily life.

There was a question the other day in the hall that related to this. It was a question about how can I accept the chaos in my practice when I know that I really want to be more concentrated. That's a pointer to the same thing. There are lots of ways to feel gloomy about our practice progress.

When you think about somebody like Dipa Ma, amazing practitioner. First time she came to IMS, she was shown around the place and she said, "Wow, it's so beautiful. Anyone could sit under a tree here and be enlightened in a week." That's a different perspective.

But for us, the chaos in our hearts and minds is pretty apparent when we sit. And we obviously would rather it be different. But the question really is, do we have a choice about it? Do we have a choice? And generally the answer is no. When the chaos is there, when we're in that cycle, that's the truth of the moment. That's the Dhamma. That's the old karma that's playing itself out in that moment.

If we resist it, it just adds to the chaos. The only way to peace is through non-resistance, non-conflict with that present moment. That is the Dhamma of it all.

We also see that the chaos that comes is part of the work of purification. The awareness basically goes through all the layers of holding and identification in the mind, brings them into consciousness so that they can be released. So there's greater and greater freedom as the chaos is held in mindfulness. But in practice, we all have our own pace of development. It's according to our paramis.

I want to close with a reading from Suzuki Roshi. This is a little long, so I'll ask for your patience. But I think it really speaks to the question of accepting our practice.

"In our scriptures"—and then he references a sutta that's found in the Anguttara Nikaya in Pali—"it is said that there are four kinds of horses: excellent ones, good ones, poor ones, and bad ones. The best horse will run slow and fast, right and left at the driver's will, before it sees the shadow of the whip. The second best will run as well as the first one does, just before the whip reaches its skin. The third one will run when it feels pain on its body. And the fourth one will run only after the pain penetrates to the marrow of its bones. You can imagine how difficult it is for the fourth one to learn how to run."

When we hear this story, almost all of us want to be the best horse. If it is impossible to be the best one, we want to be the second best. This is, I think, the usual understanding of this story. You may think that when you sit in meditation you will find out whether you are one of the best horses or one of the worst ones.

Here, however, there is a misunderstanding. If you think the aim of practice is to train you to become one of the best horses, you will have a big problem. This is not the right understanding. If you practice in the right way, it does not matter whether you are the best horse or the worst one.

When you consider the mercy of the Buddha, how do you think he will feel about the four kinds of horses? He will have more sympathy for the worst one than for the best one. When you are determined to practice with the great mind of the Buddha, you will find the worst horse is the most valuable one. In your very imperfections, you will find the basis for your firm, way-seeking mind.

Those who can sit perfectly physically usually take more time to obtain the true way of Zen, the actual feeling of Zen, the marrow of Zen. But those who find great difficulties in practicing will find more meaning in it. So I think that sometimes the best horse may be the worst horse, and the worst horse is the best one.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

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