Right Attitude

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 31:41

In many ways, discovering this quality of right attitude as you approach your meditation practice is more important than the particular meditation technique you work with or range of techniques you employ.

I want to talk this evening about this quality of right attitude—how to investigate it and learn about it in a really simple and practical way.

One of the traits of Buddhist meditation lineages is that they can lend themselves to a strong quality of striving. Throughout all the Buddhist traditions, there is this magnificent concept of enlightenment. Sometimes when people come into the actual practice, they become focused on this outcome in a rather exclusive way. This tends to dominate why we're here, why we're doing what we're doing, and influences every moment along the path. It's as though one had come in carrying a banner that says, "Enlightenment or Bust." And sometimes busting happens before enlightenment happens.

Without a certain amount of fire, the path doesn't unfold so well. So a certain amount of this quality, which we might call *dhammachanda*, or a fervor for the Dharma and for discovery, really needs to be there. Yet if it's not balanced with a sense of patience and trust in the unfolding, it can make us really tight in practice. And then that doesn't help the flowering so much.

I've been subject to some of this myself. Living in California, one is obligated to try other approaches from time to time. About ten years ago, I went to this psychic in San Francisco who'd gotten rave reviews from my friends. If you're in meditation circles in California, you're also in all these other circles. I went to see this guy in San Francisco named Manfred. As soon as I walked through the door—actually Sally and I went together; it was very experimental, so we felt we needed support—as soon as I walked through the door, he said, "Whoa. You're trying way too hard. Don't you know that God more likely shows himself to people who don't want him too much?"

For me, that was a very apt comment. I've had to work over the years of practice with this sense of striving or focus on the outcome, not to become fixated on the end result of practice.

On the other hand, if one lets go of that *dhammachanda*, that real fervor for the Dharma, then a meditation retreat can become a little too loose of a place. Here you're very much on your own a lot of the day, and someone might come into a retreat and say, "Oh, three good meals a day and a room of my own. I think I'll sleep for a week, and then if I have a single pain in my knee, I think I'll get up and leave the hall." Of course, it takes a little more determination than that to work with all the ups and downs of an intensive retreat.

Somewhere in the middle is a place where we can practice where we're really engaged and really motivated, but we're not putting extra pressure on ourselves. That kind of approach to meditation is what we're looking for in the quality of right attitude.

One Vipassana teacher summed up his approach to right attitude in three words. He said the key is to relax, observe, and accept. This is a very good reminder if you want to remember over and over the pointing of right attitude.

We begin with relaxation. Relaxation is not something that we come to after years and years of striving as a goal, but we start with relaxation. I will encourage you all—and you'll probably hear it in the instructions many times—as you begin a period of sitting or walking, see if you can find in your body and in your mind that quality of relaxation. It's not always easy, and you may not always be able to find it, but at least you can incline your practice in that direction.

One of Suzuki Roshi's early comments when he was teaching at San Francisco Zen Center was that we Westerners know how to relax our bodies, but we don't know how to relax our minds. That was one of the things his meditation was to learn about.

When we relax our body at the beginning of a sitting, it sends a strong message to our brain, to our subconscious, saying that I can relax here and now. Maybe it's through taking a few deep breaths. Maybe it's just through the sense of letting the mind fall into the body. We send the message to our whole nervous system that everything is okay, that it's safe to be calm, that nothing has to change, that things are all right just the way they are.

This is really the ground we want to have in our meditation—the sense that everything is okay the way it is. The moment is fine the way it is. This is really the basis for the quality of trust or faith. In Pali, the word is *saddhā*. It's the first of the five spiritual faculties.

We begin with that sense that things are okay the way they are. We remember that they may not be perfect. They may not be exalted. But they may be good enough. In fact, maybe this moment is good enough the way it is. And that means good enough is a basis for us to start meditating.

The second element of meditation in this threefold description is observe. Once we're established in relaxation, we simply want to notice what's happening. If we can notice what's happening, we're meditating.

This is the activity of waking up. In this moment, we want to be awake. This means we're not particularly trying to figure out what's happening to us. We're not thinking about the past or the future. We're not analyzing how it came about that our stomach feels a certain way this morning. We're just observing. We're simply noticing what the expression of life is in this moment.

This is the activity of mindfulness. Whether we're observing our breath, our body, emotions, sounds,

passing thoughts, or visual sights is not so important. What's important is that awake quality of knowing this present moment.

The beauty of observing is that it starts to open the door to understanding. Another way to say this is that mindfulness is the entry point for wisdom. As we start to see the way things come and go, the way things arise and pass in our body, in our mind, in the external environment, and we look closely, we start to learn the laws of nature. We start to learn the laws of the Dharma. The only way to become free is to understand the way our own mind works. This quality of close observation is the first step to understanding.

In Buddhism generally, understanding is the highest value. It's only understanding that can lead to freedom and the end of suffering. This observation, the quality of mindfulness, is the direct route to understanding.

Then the third part is acceptance. This links back into relaxation and says: whatever's happening in my mind and body and in the environment right now, I accept it. I don't struggle with it. I don't fight. I'm not in conflict. I can find inner peace right here and right now through this quality of acceptance.

As you know, that's not easy to do. There are so many times that we don't want what's happening to be happening. We want something else to be happening. So we go back and forth, accepting and opening, and then it's not quite right. This is where we can watch the attitude, the play of attitude. The attitude of acceptance brings us into peace. The attitude of non-acceptance, or wanting something else, brings us into conflict, and suffering is born.

Sally and Sharda and I flew here yesterday and got in last night. Sally and I brought our cat with us. Our cat is sixteen years old and had brain surgery last year, so we didn't feel we wanted to leave her with a house sitter who didn't know her. We brought the cat, and IMS graciously offered to put her up along with us here.

I don't know if you've taken a pet on an airplane, but it's not a pleasant ordeal for the animal. We had her in a carrier, and she was squawking the whole time—going through check-in, going through security, lining up for boarding. When we got on the plane, we put her under the seat in front of us, and she just kept squawking. Once we got in the air, we took her out of the carrier, held her on our laps, and she calmed right down. She went to sleep and was very mellow for most of the journey.

Then partway across the country, probably around Chicago, a flight attendant came down the aisle and said, "I'm sorry, but FAA regulations do not allow pets to be outside of their carrier. You're going to have to put her back in her carrier right now."

I saw my mind start to go back and forth between acceptance and fighting. Acceptance and fighting. We had a few words of discussion, and then Sharda kindly picked the discussion up and took it further with her. At one point I remember Sharda saying, "So now you've told us the FAA regulation. It's up to us to

make our choice."

The flight attendant said, "It is definitely not up to you to make your choice. You have to comply with the FAA regulation."

Here I'm going: Wait a minute, this doesn't make sense. She's on our lap. She's not disturbing anybody. She's really happy. She's not crying. She's going to sleep.

If we put her back in her carrier, she's going to start squawking and everybody else is going to get upset. But you know how there are some people whose mind is all about regulation, and the specific situation really doesn't matter? This was one of those people.

So in the end, I could either feel angry and upset with her, which I did, or I could feel understanding that this is the way her mind relates to regulation. And I can't argue because it's also a matter of law that you have to obey the flight attendants. So if I resist, I could be arrested in Boston, and I wouldn't be here with you tonight. I thought it's probably better if I'm with you tonight.

So we put her back in the carrier, and she squawked for the whole rest of the journey. She cried, and everybody around could hear her. In fact, a woman a few aisles back said, "Yeah, I heard your cat crying toward the end of the trip."

But for me, the interesting thing was—apart from caring about her experience—watching my mind go back and forth between resistance and judgment and understanding and compassion. Resistance and understanding. I wanted to argue, and then the other side would come up, and I just couldn't take it any further.

So often this will happen in relation to body pain or knee pain or an unpleasant emotion. We can open to it for a moment and really accept it and feel it and understand it, and then it persists and we're back in resistance. It's a very interesting place to observe: where is there suffering and where is there peace or ease? You can take a look at this on an ongoing basis.

So we start to see that we have in all our human minds a very, very deeply conditioned habit of making things right—in fact, of making things perfect in the moment because we don't want anything to be painful. This human tendency to constantly keep adjusting ourselves and the environment to make it just right is described by the Tibetans as the essence of samsara. They say the very essence of the mental movement that keeps us on the wheel—being born and dying, arising into suffering over and over and over—is the act of correcting. This is a very profound statement pointing to this movement of acceptance.

You could say that the whole of our practice is noticing this quality moment after moment after moment. So how do we correct? There are two fundamental ways, of course, which you know. One is we try to make things pleasant, and the second is we try to make the unpleasant disappear. So one expresses itself through the activity of greed or wanting things a certain way, and the flip side of that coin is wanting to

push away the things that don't conform to that. The fundamental movements of liking and disliking.

If we look for the phrase "right attitude" in the teachings of the Buddha, the place it seems most closely linked to me is in the second factor of the Eightfold Path, samma sankappa. This is often translated as right thought or right intention, but I think right attitude is also a valid aspect of samma sankappa.

This is how right intention is defined in the suttas: Right intention is the intention of renunciation, of non-ill will, of non-cruelty. So take a look at this, the act of renunciation. A synonym that's often used by the Buddha is relinquishment. So renunciation and relinquishment are pointing to the same thing. It's basically, in our modern vernacular, letting go—letting go of something that we would want to hold on to. Generosity is another expression of this same movement. Generosity is a form of relinquishment or letting go also.

So the first intention is letting go of what is pleasant, appealing, lovely, desirable. The second and third aspects—non-ill will and non-cruelty—are basically the opposites of... Let me say one other thing. They're both expressions of the mind state of aversion. Non-ill will is the expression of metta. Non-cruelty is the expression of compassion. So these are basically saying metta and compassion. These sum up the intention not to react with aversion.

So the heart of right intention is not being greedy and not being aversive. Now, if you want to refine it a little more, when the Buddha talks about action and karma, he talks about the roots of what's wholesome and the roots of what's unwholesome. And he says, "What is the root of the wholesome? Non-greed is a root of the wholesome. Non-hate is a root of the wholesome. Non-delusion is a root of the wholesome."

So when you put these together, it basically restates non-greed and non-aversion and adds in non-delusion. So these three together can become the core of how we look at right attitude. And I want to suggest that there's a really simple way to apply this teaching in any moment in your meditation practice.

If you're sitting, walking, in the dining room, wherever you are, you can check your mental attitude by asking three questions: Am I wanting something to happen? Am I resisting something that's happening? Am I knowing what's happening?

The first question—am I wanting something to happen?—if the answer is yes, you've identified greed. If you're resisting something that's happening, that's aversion. If you're not knowing what's happening, that's delusion.

When any of these three are present, our mind is not in the optimal attitude for meditation. It becomes fascinating to explore these qualities of greed, aversion, and delusion in an ongoing way. Keep it simple: Do I want something to happen? Am I resisting something? Am I not knowing what's happening?

Transition times in retreats offer particularly rich opportunities to observe these formations. As you enter the dining room tonight, those of you continuing might notice thoughts like: "It's really getting crowded in

here," or "Why are these new people so noisy?" Perhaps: "Why didn't they serve tonight what they served last night?" or "The room's too hot or too cold." These are subtle—or not so subtle—movements of liking and disliking.

For those just arriving, many thoughts typically activate when entering a new retreat situation: Where's my room? Is it in a quiet part of the building, or am I right next to the stairs or showers? What's the schedule? Is there enough time after the work period for a shower before morning sitting? Is there anybody interesting on this retreat? What's my yogi job—do I like it or not?

All these questions revolve around: Is this new place going to be okay for me? Am I going to be safe here? Will I find my way? There's plenty of opportunity for liking and disliking. When we don't notice these movements, we're missing what's happening—and delusion is present.

If we're not knowing what's happening, we can return to the present moment quickly. Simply notice something occurring—a breath, sound, sensation, emotion, thought, or visual sight. Just notice what's happening, and you're back in touch with the present moment.

If you notice greed, see if it can be released and move into acceptance. If you notice aversion, see if it can be released and move into acceptance. Sometimes it can, sometimes it can't. But be aware that when the mind is caught in reactive formations, meditation won't be as clear as it could be—the mind is clouded by that reactivity.

For experienced practitioners, desires and aversions become more subtle, often relating to meditation itself. There's longing to repeat a particularly still and present sitting, yearning for states of concentration or the absence of thought. You can feel this in your body—it can't settle in a relaxed way to the present moment because there's straining for something else.

You may not even know what it is, but you can feel the body lifting up, moving toward something else—often a memory of some beautiful meditation state, peace, love, or rapture we want to experience again. We learn to tune into the movement of greed even as it relates to these refined states we touch.

It's worth remembering what one teacher said: we're not practicing to try to stop thinking. First, because it's impossible.

We can't do it, so that will be frustrating. But we're practicing so that we know our thoughts when they're there. Oftentimes, part of the striving in meditation is we want to stop thoughts from coming because we love peace. But now we're clinging. We're attached. We're trying to recreate something. So we need to accept just the way things are. If they're thoughts, what are they? Observe the thoughts just as easily as you would observe the breath.

But suppose I look and I'm not wanting something particular to happen. I'm not resisting what's happening, and I'm in touch with what's happening in the present moment. This is the expression of

non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. This is the expression of a very wholesome state of mind, and it's from this wholesome, clear, unbiased view that we can best see things the way they are, the way things really happen in our experience.

One teacher described this kind of right attitude as an unentangled knowing. This is really what we're trying to set the conditions to unfold. And this is where the persistent looking at right attitude will lead you. As you examine the movements of wanting, of not wanting, of delusion, you'll find that they will be refined. They will diminish and sometimes fall away by that very examination.

And so start to notice when you're in this place where the three are not present, and there truly is non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. This experience is a kind of balance, a kind of contentment, and a clarity—an unentangled knowing. And then this can become more the reference point that the mind will guide itself back to again and again, a very fertile ground for insight.

Sariputta, one of the Buddha's chief disciples, was once asked, "What is nibbana?" He answered that it is the destruction of greed, the destruction of hatred, and the destruction of delusion. This is called nibbana.

So I hope you notice that this is very close to the description of right attitude. The absence of greed, although not yet completely destroyed, the absence of hatred, and the absence of delusion, even though they're temporary, comes very close to the description of nibbana. So what this says to me is that this right attitude, as we start to find it in our meditation experience, and it's never so far away, it's never that remote, starts to resemble very closely the very goal of the path that we're walking.

So we don't have to wait for 100,000 lifetimes down the road to get a sense of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. We can find it now in this quality of right attitude, and it gives us a little bit of a taste of the very end of the path. For me, this becomes a really inspiring way to look at practice because the path and the goal start to merge. What I am heading for is not so different than the way I'm walking. The goal comes closer, the path rises to meet it, and we can abide in this kind of contentment and fulfillment, at least temporarily.

So this is really what I wanted to say this evening on the subject of right attitude. You'll hear us talk a lot more about it as we go through the retreat. For now, I would encourage you to take up this investigation as something you direct the mind to regularly. I encourage you to look regularly at the presence of greed, aversion, or delusion, or the presence of non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. And this will itself be the way to refine and develop the quality of right attitude.

So we'll touch base with you in the first couple of days. This means everyone needs to check the interview schedule tomorrow morning. During tomorrow's sitting, we'll describe where the interview rooms are located so you'll know where to find us.

For this evening, we have a walking period now, followed by our final sitting at 9:15. Since people are continuing their practice, we'll maintain that sitting this evening with chanting—the sharing of the

blessings. Andrea will lead that sitting and the chanting of the sharing of the blessings.

If you've just arrived and your body is tired, you have full permission to skip that sitting tonight. Begin fresh tomorrow morning with the 5 o'clock wake-up and 5:30 sitting. We look forward to seeing you at the first sitting after breakfast.

Please rest well. Thank you for listening.

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