Working With Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 57:15

I just looked out at the trees and the sky and the white clouds that were there and the sunshine, and all of a sudden my mind opened and dropped all those little concerns that I'd been tight around. I opened to the sense of well-being and connection to nature and the vastness that brings. I hung out there for a little bit and then went back to email and got plugged in again. But nonetheless, this shift was a very pleasant one.

It reminded me of something that Dogen Zenji said, a great Zen master in Japan, who said that to study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. And to forget the self is to be enlightened by the 10,000 things of this world. This is the shift that I went through, dropping the self and being awakened by the 10,000 things back into this easy and relaxed way of being.

I mention this because it's a shift that we need to make in meditation over and over again. It is, in a way, the essence of right effort to step out of the small, constricted, self-conscious world of "I" and "my" and to open up into the vastness of life and the beauty of life and the impersonality of life. In this way, the mind really moves from bondage into freedom. We need to find out how to do that over and over.

This is a quote from Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche, who was one of the great Dzogchen masters of the last half century: "The purpose of Dharma practice is to know the nature of the non-deluded mind and to understand the workings of the deluded mind." This really encapsulates the scope of our practice.

To know the nature of the non-deluded mind means to recognize this state of freedom—at least relative freedom, ease, relaxation, openness, clarity, mindfulness, steadiness of attention. All the factors that are cultivated, commonly called the seven factors of enlightenment, which I think Kamala will be talking about later in the retreat.

And to understand the workings of the deluded mind: How do we get caught? How does this essential freedom, which is in some ways our deepest nature, get obscured, covered over? What are the mechanisms by which we lose touch with that?

In tonight's talk, I want to spend more time on particularly the workings of the deluded mind, how we get caught and how to work with that situation when we do become caught. I want to talk about working with difficult states of mind. This really picks up from the talk Steve gave a few nights ago on the hindrances and expands on it, getting a little more specific and adding a few practical pointers.

When we come into meditation practice, we start to look at the contents of our mind, maybe for the first time, and we find that the mind has this huge range of experience. I think one of the awesome things about retreat is that it tends to unpack and open up that wide range of experience that is part of our

birthright that we may not have touched for a long time.

So we get exposed to some of the very most refined, sublime, even mystical states of being through our Dharma practice—states of great joy and happiness and bliss and calm. And on the other end of the spectrum, we often open up to those darkest corners of the mind, the most difficult things for us to experience: intense feelings of loneliness or terror or despair, hopelessness.

If we have the model that the point of our Dharma practice, the point of full enlightenment, is to be rid of a lot of the range of these difficult states, we may come in expecting them to go away rather quickly. And what we find is that they don't. For most of us, they don't.

I was asked to participate over the last weekend in a panel discussion for Buddha Dharma magazine on this topic of working with difficult states of mind. There was a Tibetan Rinpoche, a Zen teacher, and I was the token Theravadan, shall we say, on the call. We were talking about what are the problems that people get into when they think that we should be quickly free of these difficult states of mind. It can lead to a lot of striving and a lot of tension.

I suggested that maybe we should reposition our aim not to be rid of these states, but to come to equanimity with them, to come into a feeling of acceptance of them. Because when you think about it, we all have these qualities within us. This is just part of the human package. Every one of us knows this range of states of mind and states of heart. They're not foreign to any of us.

And although I deeply believe that part of our human possibility is that they can be ended through the process of awakening, as the Buddha exemplified and many others have found, I also believe that for most of us that's a long journey. What I've observed in people who are far down that path is that well before these difficult states of mind are actually uprooted or removed from the mind, beings' minds are so spacious and so full of other qualities that we develop, like love and compassion, that even when they arise, they don't have so much the power to disturb us.

I believe that this happens before the full uprooting. I think this is a much more realistic goal for us in the relatively near term. If you look over the course of this retreat, the next several years of your Dharma practice, this is possible. It is possible to find the spaciousness and the acceptance, the qualities of loving kindness, of heart, to be able to accommodate these difficult states and not be so disturbed by them. The uprooting may be a more distant goal. So for the time being, I wouldn't worry so much about that. In the near term, can we find a way not to be bothered so much by these states? And I think that is really possible.

Suzuki Roshi, the Zen master who founded San Francisco Zen Center, once began a Dharma talk like this. He said, "The difficulties you're experiencing now..." He just paused. And he had a long pause.

You can imagine—this is probably in the middle of a session, an intensive period of retreat, somewhat like this—that people were probably on the edge of their seats. *Yes, how am I going to get rid of that?*

He continued: "The difficulties you're experiencing now will be with you for a long time."

When I first heard this, I thought it was a little discouraging. Where's the sense of progress? Where's the hopefulness in this practice? But as I sat with it more, I came to feel it's actually very liberating. It's liberating because what it says is you can attain a high degree of inner freedom and happiness while these states of mind remain active in us. This is possible.

So it tells me that the goal of a high degree of freedom is not so remote. We can find it with all the range of states of mind that we know today. They don't have to be plucked out. Rather, we can change our relationship to them. And it's primarily through understanding them that we change that relationship.

We come to see that strong emotions—even difficult ones—aren't necessarily a problem if we don't make them a problem. If we grasp onto them and become very concerned about them, if we hold the idea that we shouldn't be feeling them, if we dwell on the concept that they've been a problem for a long time or that they're a deep pattern of ours that really needs to be changed somehow, we can make a problem of them.

But if we simply let them arise, express their nature, and pass away—which they all will—they don't have to be problematic.

As I mentioned the other morning, you can watch children enter these emotional states without fear. Children will rush headlong into joy and happiness and delight, and in a moment they can transform to anger and sadness and frustration, and then they can drop out of that back into happiness. The states just blow through them like clouds through an empty sky. That's part of our potential also. That's what's truly freeing.

We don't have to be afraid of these states. We can let them come and go. In this greater opening to them, the heart becomes purified because we're not obstructing them. We're not getting caught on them. As they come and go, they move more easily.

This notion of purification in the Buddhist tradition has a very specific meaning. It means that the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion are weakening. This is what we mean by purifying. We come to understand that happiness isn't about having more things or attaining outside things. Happiness comes from the heart which is purified. That is, as the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion are weakened in our hearts, more happiness comes in their place. This is the route to happiness.

So the first step in relating to these difficult states is knowing what we're feeling. And this is harder than it sounds. It sounds easy: "Oh yeah, just know what you're feeling. Oh, that's mindfulness. I got it. That's the third foundation. Easy. The Buddha described it in a paragraph about this long. No problem."

But it's trickier than that.

I remember some years ago I was sitting a six-week retreat here. I think the instruction period had

finished, and I was just leaving through the back door of the hall and going out to my walking path. The retreat had been going about two weeks, and I had found one place down beyond the tennis courts where I liked to walk.

So I walked out the back door. I felt I was very mindful at that point—two weeks into the retreat. I was really with the lifting and moving and placing, lifting, moving, and placing. Then I looked down to my walking path and there was somebody in it.

The thoughts began: "What are they doing in *my* walking path? They've been here for two weeks. They know I walk there." And then I was just lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing.

I thought some more: "Are they trying to mess with my mind or something? Did I cut in front of them in the breakfast line this morning?"

Once I could recognize the anger and see how petty it was, it simply evaporated. But this illustrates how these difficult states typically operate—they seduce us by spinning stories about the way things are, taking us over through the narrative. I was completely caught in the story: they're in my path, that's wrong, and I'm right. As long as I remained trapped in that storyline, I was blind to what I was actually feeling.

All these challenging mind states we encounter have an underlying story that we unconsciously accept, and this belief system props them up. I'll call this their storyline. The storyline consists of beliefs or views about the situation, and when we buy into these views, they sustain the emotional state. If you can see through and release the storyline, the emotion will collapse because it no longer has that conceptual foundation supporting it.

I find this particularly fascinating because it reveals that our entanglement—our bondage and suffering—isn't merely emotional activity. It's emotional activity supported by views and opinions. This is precisely why the Buddhist path combines opening the heart, which addresses the emotional dimension, with awakening wisdom to see through our false views. The path beautifully integrates right understanding, which belongs to the mind, with right intention, which belongs to the heart. In our emotional life, these two aspects must work together.

This not-seeing of what we're feeling represents a form of ignorance. In terms of the kilesas or mental defilements—greed, aversion, and delusion—this exemplifies the operation of delusion. When you're experiencing something intensely without recognizing that you're feeling it, as I was during my walking meditation, you're caught in delusion. This is the deluded mind, completely unaware of what's actually happening.

Mindfulness serves as the primary tool that cuts through this type of delusion, connecting us with our actual experience. This is why I often say that mindfulness carries the tip of wisdom directly into our experience.

The key to working with all these states involves redirecting mindfulness—our attention—away from the storyline and placing it directly on the emotion itself. Once I could step away from my view that "they're wrong" and focus simply on the irritation or anger, the state became completely workable. As long as I remained entangled in the story, it remained unworkable.

When Steve spoke the other evening, he discussed the classical five hindrances that the Buddha described as obstacles to deepening meditation. Tonight I want to explore a slightly different list—one that, in my experience, represents the most common mind states that we as Western practitioners encounter in our practice, forming the most challenging aspects of our minds to work with skillfully.

The five states I'll discuss tonight are desire, anger, sadness, fear, and self-judgment. These are the ones I encounter most frequently, both in my own practice and when working with students.

I've noticed something intriguing about the first four—they seem to organize themselves into a particular structure that relates to pleasure and pain on one axis, and past and future on the other.

Consider this: if something pleasurable is anticipated in the future, what emotion most commonly arises? Desire. When something painful awaits us in the future, we typically experience fear. Another way to understand this is through hope and fear—these two states govern the mind's relationship to the future when we're not settled in present-moment awareness.

Now let's examine the past. When something pleasurable has occurred in the past but is no longer present with us, what emotion typically dominates?

Sadness, yes. Grief is about the loss of that which was pleasurable that we no longer have. So sadness or grief. Loneliness could be a variation. Despair could be a variation.

Now this last one may be a little tricky, and there may be other answers, but think about if something painful happened in the past, what's the dominant emotion when you look back on it? Let's say someone else caused that pain.

Judgment or anger. Yes, judgment or anger.

So I think that's why these four are so strong for us. They have to do with these fundamental poles of pleasure and pain painted against the backdrop of past and future. And these are the emotions that often come up. Then I bring in self-judgment because it seems to be our Western hell realm to deal with. So we'll talk about that a little bit also.

Each of these states has a mood, it has expressions in the body, and it has this storyline that's bound up with conceptual thought. So I'll talk about all of those.

Desire is this movement of mind that leans forward to something pleasurable that it wants to happen in the future. This force comes very, very often on a retreat, and sometimes it can be quite heart-wrenching.

The force of missing people, missing places, missing where you feel comfortable, missing certain kinds of activities that have meant a lot to you—even missing certain kinds of food or clothing can come up quite poignantly for people on retreat.

As you look into the experience of desire, you'll start to see that there's a kind of comfort there by bringing up these familiar places, people, objects—that is a pleasure. So in a way, it's a way of bringing a pleasure into the moment. But at the same time, as you investigate the quality of desire, you realize there's also something that's always unsatisfying in desire. There's something that's unfulfilled. The very missing of the pleasant leaves a kind of hole in the heart. And it leaves this yearning, a feeling of not being fulfilled, not being complete.

So intrinsic within desire is this sense of dissatisfaction, of unsatisfactoriness. Desire always carries in its wake a trail of dukkha, a feeling of dukkha, because one of the curious things is we never seem to want what we already have. You notice that? When was the last time you wanted a hand at the end of your arm? It never occurs to us to want that unless it was gone. If our hand was taken away, we would want it a lot. But while it's here, it's not an object of desire. We always want what we don't have, and that's the dukkha of desire.

I was teaching in Italy a few years ago, which was a joy, I have to say. All the things you imagine about Italian yogis are probably true. First of all, it was very hard for them to stop talking. The silence was not quite as well-founded as the silence is here. The culture of the retreat center was a little different. They wanted to put out red wine at lunch and dinner, so we had to ask them to take that away. But nonetheless, there was an espresso machine just outside the dining hall. So after lunch, the coins were going in and the cups were coming out. Not as much sloth and torpor at the 2:15 sit, though. That was good.

I found that a lot of the Italian yogis had this really beautiful fluency with their emotions. They're very comfortable talking about what they were feeling and more in touch than I had tended to be before I began practice in knowing what I was feeling. And they weren't shy about talking about it. They felt like they were very at ease in their emotional life.

So on about the third day of the retreat, I had an interview—we had translators for all the interviews—with a very nice young Italian guy who came in and said he was having a hard time settling into the retreat. And I said, "Why is that?"

He said, "Well, this is August. This is our vacation time in Italy. And I had two choices. I could come on this retreat, or my friends asked me to go to the Caribbean with them for a ten-day vacation."

And I said, "Oh, why did you come on the retreat?"

And he said, "Because the tickets to the Caribbean were all sold out."

So if you kind of compare in your mind—let's see, Caribbean vacation, warm sun, golden sands, blue

water, or sitting and walking for eighteen hours a day—he was having a little trouble settling.

So we talked about how the force of desire, wanting to be with his friends, the images of the vacation spot, could be affecting his ability to be present in the moment a little bit. And what if he didn't have those thoughts about the Caribbean? Then how would it be to be here?

So he went off and meditated, and when he came back in for his next interview, which was with another teacher, the problem had gone away. He saw that what was disturbing him was the wanting.

It wasn't that there was anything wrong with the retreat or that he couldn't settle. It was that he kept taking himself out. When he let go of the desire, he landed in the retreat, and then everything opened fine. This is what desire does. It takes us out of the present and creates a conflict. It creates a sense of insufficiency where there may not be any.

One of my friends is a greed type—a personality type that's dominated by the force of wanting. He says there's a line that he uses when desire is present in him. He asks, "Is there anything truly lacking in this moment?" So when desire is strong, that's a good question to ask. Is there anything truly lacking in this moment? Or is it basically okay the way it is, and it's just the wanting that is stirring us up?

In the meditative environment, sometimes the things we want come to be the special things that happen on retreat. We may want a particular meal. We may want a particular meditation experience. Sometimes the deepest, deepest longings are to re-experience some form of sitting that we'd had earlier. Start to notice if this comes in, because this will create tension. And as long as you're looking for some particular experience, you're not open to the moment as it is. All the unfolding of the Dharma comes from aligning with the moment the way it is. This is the golden doorway in practice.

So I start to notice that in myself if I'm having thoughts about the way a sitting was a day ago or two days ago or a week ago. Are you dwelling on a past experience of sitting or walking or being in nature? Are those thoughts and images in your mind? If they are, check and see if there's a wanting at work. And if there is, that's where to be. Otherwise, the wanting will block you from being in the present.

You don't have to make the wanting go away. You can establish mindfulness right then and there by being with the wanting. That's what's true. Relate with that. And as you open to that, you come back into the present moment.

The storyline that underlies the wanting—you can look into this for yourself. This might vary from person to person, from incident to incident. The basic storyline in wanting is something like, "I would be happy if I had this thing. I would be happy." That's why desire becomes such a big deal, because there's implicit within it—and it's usually subconscious—this belief: it would make me happy. It's the key to my happiness.

Of course, what we don't do when we pick up a storyline or a view like that is we don't look at

impermanence. We don't realize that if we get the thing we want, sooner or later, either it will go away or it will fail to satisfy us. Because we've had many, many opportunities to get the things we want, and we haven't found a lasting happiness from them. But we ignore that in the moment of desire. We don't look at that truth of impermanence.

The second of the states that I wanted to talk about is anger, which is one form of aversion. Steve talked the other night about aversion as a hindrance. And aversion has a lot of different flavors. Just a partial list: anger, ill will, hatred, impatience, irritation, fear, sadness, grief, judgment, blame, resentment, depression, despair, resistance. Are you overwhelmed yet? And that's just partial. I'm sure you could think of more. So aversion has a lot of different flavors. Anger is a strong one.

The general tone of aversion is not liking, negativity, seeing things in a critical frame of mind. When we're feeling negative, everything tends to rub us the wrong way. Everything appears imperfect, flawed, not quite right.

The Buddha told this story to a group of monks who were standing around in the clearing in a forest. Actually, it wasn't a story.

It was happening right on the spot. As they were standing around in the forest, a jackal ran out and stopped in the clearing, standing there for a moment. But it obviously wasn't peaceful—it immediately ran into the hollow of a tree and lay down, but only momentarily. Then it jumped up and ran into a cave, stood there briefly, and ran back into the forest.

The Buddha said, "Monks, did you see that jackal? It wasn't comfortable in the forest. It wasn't comfortable in the clearing. It wasn't comfortable in the tree hollow, and it wasn't comfortable in the cave. It wasn't comfortable standing or lying down or running. It blamed its suffering on the forest, on the clearing, on the tree hollow, on the cave. It blamed its suffering on standing, on lying, on running."

The Buddha said the problem was with none of these. "Monks, that jackal had mange. The mange was its suffering. It couldn't be comfortable because it had mange."

Aversion is like mange. When the mind is in a state of aversion, nothing feels good. Nothing feels right. We tend to blame our problem on all the other conditions, but the problem is the aversion in the mind. Everything rubs it the wrong way.

When aversion has been there for a long time—when there's a chronic sense of aversion—it's probably masking some long-standing pain that we aren't able to open to. The aversion gets implanted or conditioned by the presence of pain in the heart or mind or body that's been there for a long time.

When there's a long-standing pattern of aversion, the classical antidote—a really effective antidote—is loving-kindness practice. This is mentioned in the suttas over and over. The Buddha talks about metta as the antidote to aversion because metta has a way of softening the mind, opening the heart, and letting us

then open to and include that pain.

Anger is a particular form of aversion. Here the storyline, as it was when I was caught in my walking experience, is basically: "I'm right and you're wrong. You shouldn't have done what you did and it hurt me." That's the basic storyline. If we listen to the thoughts of that storyline again and again, we sustain the anger.

Sometimes this is a little tricky because the thoughts could be true. In the case of my walking meditation, it really wasn't—there was no plaque on that walking path that said "Guy Armstrong," much as I would have liked to put one there. That walking space was open to anybody. It was my delusion to think that it was mine.

But it's different at other times. People do take things from us that belong to us, that we have a right to expect will be there when we go back. In that case, it's not proper for people to take those things. This is the point of the second precept: not taking that which isn't freely given. So we may be right.

Really awful things do happen in the world—things that really shouldn't happen. There's war, there's murder, there's racism, there's violence and cruelty in the world. It really shouldn't happen, but it does. So it may appear that getting angry is an appropriate response to those things. It can be a useful motivator for social justice. Many people have drawn on the power of outrage to try to correct things in the world that are wrong, and in that sense it can be a useful motivator.

But as meditators we have to take a look: What's the most effective way to change the world? Whether that involves anger or love is something for each of us to wrestle with. We also need to look at our own experience. Here on retreat, this is probably the most important place to look. In terms of our own experience: What leads to suffering and what leads to happiness?

In the classical texts, they say that getting angry at someone has within it an element of wanting to hurt that person.

This is an interesting place to look. When we talk about anger in Western psychology, we often condone it or approve it or say it's justified. But from the point of view of the Dharma, we really want to look and see what's going on in the mechanism of anger. And I found in looking at my own anger, often there is integral to it a wish to hurt the other person.

Now in Buddhism, the enjoyment of hurting somebody else is called cruelty. It's the far enemy of compassion. Compassion is that heartfulness that wishes to relieve the suffering of others. Cruelty is that frame of mind that enjoys someone else's suffering. Wanting to hurt someone has within it basically the beginning of cruelty. When I saw that, I had to question anger in a really deep way because I couldn't live with the sense of myself being a cruel person. I couldn't live with that truth about myself and feel good about it.

Now it so happens that it is a truth. Sometimes I do get angry. Within that anger I see that I want to hurt, but I can't feel good about it. So it's made me more resolved to look really closely and deeply into this phenomenon of anger.

What the texts say is that wanting to get angry at somebody is like picking up a hot coal and getting ready to throw it at them so that they'll be burned by the hot coal. The problem is that we pick it up first and we burn ourselves before we ever throw it. So start to take a look at this side of anger—that before we can ever express it, we are hurting ourselves in the holding of it, in the maintaining of it.

It was the seeing of the suffering that I felt as a result of my own anger that was most effective in getting me to let go. And letting go means basically to stop the thoughts that blame the other person and justify myself. These are the thoughts that feed the fires of anger. As we think more of those thoughts, we're just throwing more logs on the fire of anger. So it's a big renunciation. But if you practice with it, you'll see it's the way through anger. It's the way not to suffer from our own anger. And that's the letting go of the blame.

When we let go of that blame, the mind starts to cool. Because like all states, anger will just manifest its impermanence. It's the blame that sustains it, that feeds it. When we let go of it, it starts to pass. So in Buddhist circles, this work with anger is considered a really important part of the path.

The Dalai Lama tells a story about a monk that he had known in Tibet before 1959. 1959 is when he left Tibet for India, ten years after the Chinese invasion. And he thought that this monk was just a rather ordinary practitioner. Then some years later he met the monk again in India and the monk told him his story. He said that he had been in a Chinese prison for twenty years and finally he had been released and then he had escaped from Tibet and made his way to India. The Dalai Lama hears many, many stories like this. I can't even imagine the bigness of his compassion to be able to hold all these stories that he hears.

So he asked the monk about his time in prison. And the monk said, well, he often felt in danger. And the Dalai Lama said, were you tortured? Were you in fear for your life? And the monk said, yes, I was tortured, and I was in fear for my life, but that's not the danger that I meant. I mean that I was in danger of being angry with my captors.

The Dalai Lama said that his opinion of this monk was greatly enhanced by that comment, that he had the devotion to practice in that way, to work with non-anger, even under those extreme conditions.

Sometimes the sense of anger or criticalness gets directed toward ourselves and manifests as self-judgment. This comes up often in retreat. And I think part of it is that we lose our social connection. We don't have the kind of social strokes that we do in daily life. People are interacting with us and we're getting signs of love and affection. And when those signs of love and affection are taken away and we're just on our own resources, then this more critical part of the mind often comes out and we find ourselves lacking in many ways.

This is actually a sign of what's referred to in the tradition as mana or conceit. Conceit is the tendency to compare ourselves to others, and if we compare ourselves as being better than, equal to, or worse than, it's considered a sign of mana, and it's considered an impurity of the mind. The Buddha basically said there's no need to ever compare oneself to another in terms of one's stature. Certainly one can compare in skill levels and certain qualities or attributes, but to say that one person is better than another, there's no need to say that. So the mind doesn't make that comparison.

But this quality of comparing mind or mana or conceit is only uprooted at arahantship. So only the fully enlightened person no longer compares.

That means the judging mind is going to be around for a while. So again, it's good to get to know how to work with it.

The storyline with the judging mind is some form of "I'm not good enough, I'm not loving enough," or "I'm not lovable enough" - something like that, some form of "I'm insufficient as a person."

Sometimes these thoughts, these opinions of ourselves, start from a kind of rational observation. I'll share what one person I work with in California reported. She's a therapist, and one of her clients left her. That happens all the time, of course, but it caused her a lot of self-doubt. The first thing she thought was, "Oh, I'm just not the right therapist for that person." And that actually made complete sense - my personality is not a match for their personality. That was fine.

But then it went to, "I don't have enough compassion or warmth to be able to help them." And then it went to, "I'm really not a very loving person." And then it went to, "Actually, I've never loved anyone and no one's ever loved me." At that point, she was just crushed by the weight of her own judgments of herself.

I share this because I hope you can see this is not an isolated problem - we all make these exaggerations of ourselves. In fact, any judging thought that really burdens you is probably not true. It's probably not true. The thoughts that really burden us are the ones that go too far: "I can never love. I have never loved. No one has ever loved me. I don't have any friends. No one cares about me." These really huge generalizations generally overstep the bounds of truth.

So one way of working with those judging thoughts is to turn and ask the judge - have you met the judge yet, by the way? Anybody met the judge? The judge is just a thought, but if you want to get playful with the judge, you can give them a personality. You can give them a face, give them a name, draw them like a cartoon. What does your judge look like? What do they sound like? You can have fun and just kind of make something up here.

One person I work with - their judge is named Darth Vader. So they're often saying, "Welcome, Darth. Nice to have you back. Thank you, Darth, for that opinion."

You can turn to your judge and say, "What you just said about me isn't true. Please restate it as a true

statement." If you can get the judge to restate it as a true statement, you'll find it's usually not that bad. It's something like, "I wasn't the right therapist for that person." No big deal. So you can neutralize the judgments by making them truthful for a change.

One of the other ways to work with judgment - Joseph may have talked about this in part one, it's one of his favorites - every time you hear a judging thought, you append the phrase "and the sky is blue." That just makes it light. You're walking through the lunch line and you see somebody took a lot of dessert. You say, "That person took too much dessert, and the sky is blue." You can try that also.

This sense of not being good enough is really widespread in the West today. I really think it's a comment on our culture that it's so widespread. I don't know quite why it's happened, but it seems to be a big problem. Sometimes it grows stronger and becomes self-hatred.

I was recently ordained as a monk in Thailand - I mean, this was a long time ago, but in the story I had just ordained.

My preceptor asked me to stop at a branch monastery in Chiang Mai while traveling to a forest monastery for retreat. I spent several pleasant days there, enjoying the good food and the beautiful town.

I particularly enjoyed meeting another Western monk who had been in robes for thirteen or fourteen years. He was very large-hearted, loved people, and enjoyed conversation. The Thai people really appreciated him. He would give interviews to them in the afternoon—he spoke good Thai—and meditate in the morning. Very warm, he drew many Thai people to meet with him.

On my first morning there, we went out on alms round together. He went first as the senior monk, I followed behind, and then there were two novices behind us—young boys whose presence puzzled me since novices usually don't go on alms round.

As we walked down the road at his usual hour, people started coming out when they saw him. Very soon our bowls were filled up. He was well-known, well-liked, and well-supported—which showed in his bowl, quite big, bigger than this bell, matching his girth because he was obviously well-fed.

After we both filled our bowls, he motioned to duck down an alley. There's no food in an alley—why were we going there? In the alley, the novices opened their robes, revealing big plastic bags hanging over their shoulders. We transferred all the food from our bowls into these bags, covered them up, put the lids on our bowls, and went down the street again to fill our bowls once more.

Returning to the monastery with this huge amount of food, we all ate well—the novices, other monks, nuns, and lay people. All of this abundance flowed from the metta, the love that the Thai people had for this monk and his spirit of warmth and loving-kindness.

I was very impressed, thinking he was just a natural meditator. But as we talked, he revealed that it wasn't always like this—that he had spent the first nine years in robes working through his self-hatred. Nine

years. Yet he had completely transformed through practice, developing this warm nature beloved by the community.

What really offsets self-judgment is confidence in our own goodness, our basic goodness. As we come more and more to trust that the non-deluded mind is our basic nature—awake, alive, and growing in us—this offsets any sense of insufficiency or lack. Each of you has everything you need. It's simply a matter of clearing away the obscurations so that your true nature shines through more and more. As we touch this truth and gain confidence, we know that our heart is genuinely good.

I'd like to save fear for another time—I may want to discuss it at length on another evening. For sadness, I'll simply say that the storyline usually goes: "I can't be happy because I've lost this thing." That's the root of sadness or grief—believing we were happy before when we had something, and because we've lost it, we can no longer be happy. This view often becomes so deeply rooted that it's very hard to open to the feeling of sadness itself. We come to believe that the loss has blocked our happiness.

So there's often the fear with sadness, and you might say this is a sub-storyline—the fear that if we open to the sadness, we're going to get drowned or lost in that deep pool of unhappiness and sorrow. So we may hold ourselves back from feeling it, from opening to it, out of that fear.

But that is just a story. It's just a view or a belief. It's not true. Grief of any sort has the ability to come up, be experienced, and then eventually released. But we just have to have the willingness and the trust to go into it. It won't happen all at once. But to experience it and back off, to experience it and back off—little by little we find that it starts to unfold itself and becomes more, as somebody used the other day, permeable. We start to see little holes or little dents in the sadness, and it's a sign that it's starting to weaken and can fall away.

So in all these cases, the sense of freedom doesn't come from getting rid of the state. These states will come to visit for a long time, but it comes by understanding their nature and how they're put together—this mechanism that involves the sensations in the body, the mood in the mind, and this underlying belief or storyline about them.

As we start to understand the mechanisms that put these states together, they don't fool us anymore. We start to see, "Oh, that's just wanting. This is how it makes one feel. This is just anger. These are the causes and conditions. This is the remedy." When the causes and conditions are no longer there, the state passes away. All these states will exhibit their own impermanence if they're not clung to.

And this is where our basic faith comes—that we can open to them. None of them will be here forever. If we open and let them express themselves, all of them will also pass. They get stuck when we don't have that trust and we close down to the feeling.

So what we're really seeing as we start to get more familiar with their real nature is they're just like passing clouds, like aspects of the weather. They arise, they express, they pass away. And in this, we're

really seeing their emptiness. They don't have any essence, and they're not lodged in us. They are not our deepest nature. As Steve said the other night, they're just visitors. We're really seeing the empty nature of these phenomena.

I'd like to just close with this poem from Rilke. It's from a book called *The Book of Hours*, translated by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows. It's kind of nice to have a Buddhist take on Rilke's poetry. And in this particular poem, just to set the stage, Rilke is imagining that God creates human beings, but before launching them into life, gives them a little pep talk. So this is the pep talk:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out in the night. These are the words we dimly hear: You, sent out beyond your memory, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Give me your hand.

Let's just sit for a moment together.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.

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