Closing Talk - Mind and Life Retreat

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 17:12

I want to say I really appreciate the work that you all did on this retreat. We commented many times as the days were unfolding that one thing this group knew very well how to do was to work hard. And it was attested to by your presence at the sittings and the walkings and your discipline, diving right in to the regimen.

We also recognize this retreat was something of a risk for a lot of you. You'd never been in an environment like this before. You didn't know what you were getting into. And so especially we appreciated your willingness to take on this form and the rigor of it.

At the same time, I hope you appreciate it was something of a risk for us too, because not only are you a highly intelligent and possibly critical audience, but if this had been a total flop, it would have been quite a visible embarrassment for IMS. So we all feel very good about the way things have turned out, and I hope you will also.

We're at the position now where we're about to make the transition from this sheltered, very supportive, very simple environment back into the hustle and bustle of our daily life where, as you know as well as anyone, the values of that world are not entirely consistent with the values that we've been trying to foster here.

In a very broad way of looking, we might say that the mainstream values of our culture are primarily in the direction of acquisition. It's about having more, whether that's money personally or professionally, whether it's things, whether it's recognition and credits and awards. It's mostly about accumulation. In the practice of mindfulness, as you've seen again and again, the key is in letting go—not in having more, but in having less. And that's what allows us to come into this clear relationship with the present moment.

So many people have been wondering how we can best take what has been precious and meaningful from this experience and translate it back into our daily life. I think the first thing I want to say is that daily life is much more about relationship than retreat is. And so the core of our practice in daily life will probably move into the arena of relationship.

Mindfulness is an incredibly supportive tool in that relationship because we can understand much better our own part, our own participation in the world of human culture and society and individual relationships. As I was reflecting on some of the things that I've seen in myself and lots of people who've gone through this practice over the years, some of the great benefits that I see are that we learn how to have a little more space around our thoughts. We learn to see a thought as a thought and to be aware

when it arrives.

Because of that, then, we start to have a little more awareness of the emotions that thoughts engender, and particularly when those emotions are difficult in the nature of anger or fear or great desire or sadness. That awareness gives us the opportunity to have a little more choice in our next action so that hopefully we can relate from a place of wisdom and not a compulsive place of surrendering to the reactive emotion.

I think these are some of the greatest immediate benefits of this practice. These result in our life in having more peace, more happiness, and more kindness. So I think this last point, especially the kindness, is something I want to talk about for just a minute. Again, who's better to think about than the Dalai Lama in this regard?

A few years ago, the Dalai Lama was being interviewed by Oprah Winfrey, and it's recounted in a book called The Wisdom of Forgiveness, if you're interested in reading more detail. So Oprah began by asking the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?" "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect," the Dalai Lama replied. "Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "An insect, hmm, okay." The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also." And that's it.

Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?" "Small mistakes every day maybe," the Dalai Lama said, "but major mistakes, it seems, no." "No major mistakes," Oprah repeated. She fell silent. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life to have no regrets."

This ability to live in the world without having regrets is a big challenge. Most of us find that we make small slips all the time and we make major slips regularly. One Zen master said that Dharma practice was basically repeating mistake after mistake. So we might notice that in our own lives also.

In learning to relate to the world consistently from this place of kindness, the best framework that I know of are the five precepts that Sharon mentioned on the opening night. These are guidelines for our lives as lay practitioners. They're very commonsensical and really very simple: not killing, not stealing, not harming others through our sexuality, not lying, and not engaging in drugs and intoxicants to the point of heedlessness.

I want to pay specific attention to the notion of speech because most of us are usually fairly good about not killing at least other humans, not stealing. We're getting better at refining our sexual energy, I think. But it's in the area of speech, I think, that we most often get hurt in daily life and most often hurt other people.

So in addition to the guidelines on not lying, the other guidelines that the Buddha encouraged with speech were not undermining one another, not speaking in a divisive way that creates separation, not taking

what one has heard here and repeating it over there to others in a negative sense. So having an engendering of respect for one another in our personal life, in our professional life.

He also encouraged us to speak gently, to avoid speaking harshly. When we're in the throes of anger, it's very easy to vent that anger on someone else. It's very hurtful to be the recipient of that kind of angry energy. So we must really take care with our speech to be gentle in our expression, even when we need to communicate that we're angry with someone else, which often happens.

The third guideline he offered was not to spend too much time in idle chatter—the kind of conversations that go on around the water cooler that are simply about what one co-worker said to another and that are merely for titillation or gossip. We can take a pass on those and spend our time talking about things that are meaningful to us, that touch our heart, that come from our heart.

In particular, on the topic of speech, he said that if we are about to criticize another—this is a rule that was instigated for the community of monks and nuns that he led for the forty-five years of his life—one who is about to criticize another should realize five qualities within themselves before they offer that criticism.

The first is: I will speak at the right time, because sometimes saying it publicly or in front of certain people or when someone else is vulnerable is not going to be skillful.

I'll speak in truth. That means if I have a complaint, I'll just say truthfully what it's about and not try to exaggerate or overstate what the offense has been.

I will speak gently, not harshly, which I mentioned earlier.

I will speak with kindly intention. Isn't this interesting? That one can deliver criticism to another with a kindly intention. And how can that be? It's the fifth point: I will speak to their benefit and not to their detriment. So we offer criticism in hopes that somebody else's understanding of themselves can be improved and it can be a pathway to greater happiness in their life.

Sometimes he advised, if one can't put one's mind into these five qualities, to withhold the criticism until one is able to do that. That's a high bar, but I think it's a very useful reflection if we're about to engage in admonishing another.

So on the level of informal practice, the precepts are very good guides, held within the context of those sublime abidings that Sharon talked about last night—the brahmaviharas: loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

There's also a really critical piece in daily life for formal practice. If you found these tools and this experience to be a benefit, we really encourage you to carry that back into your daily life.

The conversation with Oprah continued in this line also. Oprah continued the interview with the Dalai

Lama by saying, "Would you encourage the rest of the world to meditate?" she asked.

"Stupid question," the Dalai Lama's response was as immediate as it was unexpected. Oprah's face froze. There was a stunned silence in the hotel room. One thought crossed everyone's mind: this was probably the first time someone had ever said this to Oprah's face.

The Dalai Lama grew thoughtful. "Should people meditate? I think so," he said after a pause. Maybe it had been a stupid question, but he had still wanted to reply with care. "It is worthwhile, for the world has to look more inward. We are not doing enough here. I'm not saying that people should be religious-minded. What I'm saying is we should focus on our inner potential more."

"Oh, I believe that," Oprah said, visibly relaxing. "That's why I asked the stupid question."

So this question of formal practice comes in often at the end of retreat. People say, "Should I sit in my daily life?" Now you know the answer. "How much should I sit?" is usually the next question.

When I was beginning meditation, my teachers—who are here with you now, Joseph and Sharon were my first teachers—said very clearly and unambiguously at the end of a retreat in a talk like this: "Sit two hours a day." At that time, I was in my twenties and fairly uninvolved, and I could do that. In fact, I did that for years, and some years it was more. When I was on staff here, we were expected to sit three hours a day.

So I just say whatever time you can find in your daily life is the right time for you. I like to sit when I first get up in the morning because my mind hasn't yet gotten plugged into the events of the day. Other people like to sit right before they go to bed because it clears their mind for sleep. Other people like to sit right after they come home from work because there's an emptying of all the events of the day. Whatever time you can find in your life, you'll test it and find the value that it has for you. I just encourage you to make the effort and see what will work for you.

Please continue to come back to retreat if you found this experience useful. I find that a combination of a consistent daily practice and one retreat a year is really good for keeping one's dharma practice alive and deepening. So if you can manage to do that, that would be a great start.

Of course, sometimes people get more motivated. I want to let you know we do have longer opportunities for retreat for those of you who feel the call. There's a three-month retreat here every fall, which also has the option of doing a six-week piece in either half of it. And there are often retreats of two to three weeks throughout the year on our calendar.

I'm going to be flying back this afternoon to California. I live near Spirit Rock meditation center, a sister center in Marin County, and we also have a two-month retreat every winter in February and March that is also available in one-month pieces. So please, if this has touched you, especially if it's touched you deeply, think about giving more time. You'll have a lot more time after the settling process. Remember those

painful first three days? Then after that, it goes on and on. Hard to imagine, but it's terrific.

The last thing I wanted to mention is because it's hard to keep alternative values alive as an individual in a broader society, it's very helpful if you can make Sangha connections wherever you live. There are a lot of meditation groups and instruction opportunities available around the country. A good place to look is in a journal called The Inquiring Mind, of which I think there are copies out on the tables during this retreat. So look to see if there's anybody in your area who's interested in practicing together, and that support will be invaluable.

I wanted to close with a mention of another scientist whom I've appreciated a lot. There was an article about him last weekend in the New York Times, and that is Albert Hoffman. Albert Hoffman was the chemist who first synthesized LSD in 1938, was the first subject for LSD and kind of transformed a generation with his work. He's still alive and actually celebrated his 100th birthday on Wednesday. So that's why the Times was doing the interview.

His bright eyes flash with a recollection of a mystical experience he had on a forest path more than 90 years ago in the hills above Baden, Switzerland. Notice that this was before the invention of the drug. The experience left him longing for a similar glimpse of what he calls a miraculous, powerful, unfathomable reality. "I was completely astonished by the beauty of nature," he said, laying a slightly gnarled finger alongside his nose, his longish white hair swept back from his temples and the crown of his head. He said any natural scientist who was not a mystic was not a real natural scientist.

"Outside is pure energy and colorless substance. All of the rest happens through the mechanisms of our senses. Our eyes see just a small fraction of the light in this world. It is a trick to make a colored world, which does not exist outside of human beings."

When asked if the drug had deepened his understanding of death, he appeared mildly startled and said, "No, I go back to where I came from, to where I was before I was born. That's all."

So it's been a pleasure to share this week with you. May your practice continue to deepen in both secular and spiritual ways. And may you come to great happiness and great kindness in your life. Thank you for all your work.

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