Morning Instructions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 48:08

This morning we're going to do a guided reflection along the theme of emptiness and compassion. I want to preface it by talking about how this came up for me. Those of you who have read my book know that at one point when I was a monk in Thailand, I got to observe autopsies. I stood next to dead bodies for the first time in my life and watched three different autopsies as the coroner determined what had caused the death of these people.

After sitting through that experience, in quite a sensitive and open place, I went out and caught a bus to return to my monastery. I was really in a different space. As I was watching people—this was in Bangkok in the center of town—I thought there wasn't much difference between those people walking around and the people I had just seen who had died. There was a body, and in the people who were walking around, you could see their eyes were still bright, and there was still consciousness going on.

I thought, there's a body, there's consciousness, and of course there are all the movements of mind—the sankharas are going on. In terms of the three aggregates that we've talked about—body, consciousness, movements of mind—the first two, body and consciousness, seemed so strong and so fundamental that the movements of mind seemed like ripples on the surface of the water, just waves coming and going.

What really struck me was there was a body, which was totally in the present moment. There was consciousness, which was totally in the present moment, just this brightness of people being aware of things. But the mind's faculty of memory means we remember things that happened in the past and based on that we project things that are going to happen in the future. All those memories and projections are happening in the present too.

When I looked at people just walking around Bangkok, I was seeing totally their present moment reality. There's the body and there's consciousness. All the rest were just ripples on that reality.

That's what the reflection this morning is going to be about. It's about seeing people as body plus consciousness and seeing how that feels, then seeing people with a history and seeing how that feels. This will be our exploration this morning.

Please begin the meditation by sitting easily, relaxed and alert. Connect to the body and sitting, settling into an awareness of the body, feeling the heart center, connecting with a sense of goodwill for yourself, for all beings.

Now I'm going to invite you to bring to mind a friend. It could be the friend you used in the brahmaviharas practice. It doesn't necessarily have to be—any friend that you would like to connect with

at this point. Let's take a moment and choose someone.

Once you've chosen them, bring them to mind, bring them present with you in this moment. Perhaps see them or say their name.

Because this person is a friend, you know something about their life. I'm going to invite you to reflect on the circumstances of their life and actually what you know of their personal history. As you connect with your friend, you might bring to mind where they were born, how they were raised, what their family of origin was like and how that affected them. Then anything you might know about their movement into adulthood—the period as a young adult is often turbulent. How that affected them.

As they've grown as an adult, any of the major things that come to mind that happened in their life? You might think about important relationships. Have they had a close personal relationship, an intimate relationship? How has that gone? Maybe there's been more than one. How have they gone? What's their current family situation? Are they in a close relationship? What do you know about their parents? Have they had children? How are those relationships for them?

Think about their current health situation. Do they have any health challenges at the moment, either physical or mental? Or are they in very good health? How has their state of health affected them?

Consider their livelihood, their support. What has their work life been like? How have they supported themselves? Has their work been easy and satisfying? Has it been difficult, challenging? How's their money situation? Is it comfortable or is it difficult?

And in all these ways that you've considered your friend's life from early on up until now, can you feel how all these factors have to some extent shaped them? And so considering your friend's overall balance of happiness and sorrows.

And now letting go of this reflection on your friend. Letting go of any thoughts about their past or history. Just returning to the present moment. Feeling yourself sitting easily. Aware of the body or aware of awareness, coming into the present moment.

And now I'd invite you to bring your friend in again. Connect with them, perhaps seeing their image. But this time only see them as a person totally in the present moment. Fundamentally, they are a body plus consciousness. Brightness of awareness, the body, all in the present.

Yes, there are mental states, there are moods and emotions and thoughts. Let's see those as passing ripples on a very large lake. The lake being the body plus consciousness all in the present.

How does it feel to see your friend this way? How does it feel compared to seeing them with all their personal history? Which way does it seem leaves your friend more open, more free, lighter? In which way of looking at your friend brings more compassion, more caring, more humanity?

And now letting go of your friend, thanking them for joining you in the reflection. Coming back into the present moment, just sitting quietly. Aware of the body, the sounds, space, awareness.

And now bringing to mind yourself, connecting with yourself here and now, aware of your heart center, with a sense of goodwill, wishing the best for yourself. And then taking a look back over your life and your situation—your childhood, the family you grew up in, and how that life affected you.

Young adulthood and all the things one goes through then. Relationships, close personal relationships, those with partner or partners, or the absence of them, family, relation to parents. Any children? Any grandchildren? The joys and sorrows with family.

Your own health. How is it now? How has it been over time? Have there been health challenges? How have they felt?

And your own livelihood and support. Any work or careers that you've done. The ups and downs of work life. And your current sense of support financially—how is that for you? Adequate? Comfortable? Or difficult?

And so with this sense of the course of your life, how it has affected you, how things are still affecting you, just a sense of what has made you who you are.

And then letting go of that recollection, letting go of that reflection. Just coming back into the present moment. Just a simple noticing of the body, mood, heart, space, awareness. Just resting in the present moment, letting go of any thoughts of memory or past.

And now again connecting with yourself and maybe seeing an image of yourself or a photograph of yourself somewhere you're comfortable. And this time as you look at yourself, just see body and consciousness. These are the two foundations for our human experience. We're in a body and we're conscious.

Thoughts and moods come and go like waves on a lake. But fundamentally we're body and consciousness totally in the present moment.

And when you see yourself in this way, how does that feel? No reference to the past. No reference to history. Just the present moment reality—body and consciousness.

Compared to seeing yourself with history, which way feels more open, freer, less confined, more available for transformation? And compared to seeing yourself with history, which evokes more compassion, more human understanding, more patience?

And now letting go of that reflection, that investigation, just returning to the present moment experience, sitting quietly, feeling the body, relaxing the body, relaxing the mind. Breathing in, breathing out. Letting the attention be wide and knowing all the sounds that are coming and going.

If the reflections earlier brought up any emotions that are difficult to be with, not so comfortable, just allowing them to be in the wide space of your attention. Not pushing them away or judging them. Just allowing them to be felt in this big space of awareness.

If the emotions are very strong, remember that you can always return to your Vipassana practice. We've trained a lot in working with difficult emotions. Remembering the steps of RAIN: to recognize, allow, investigate, not identify. Allowing the emotion to be there, to do whatever it will do, and knowing that it's held within the vast space of awareness.

And so for the last part of this sitting, just returning to your practice of awareness, or if it feels the mind could benefit from more stability, returning to mindfulness of breath, or one of the Brahma Viharas.

So this reflection, you might say, is the start of our integration practice. We are linking back up into relationships and the wider world and the activity of thought. So I'm curious, in these two approaches, both to your friend and to yourself—one with personal history and one just present moment—did one of them evoke for you a more sense of freedom and openness?

"The latter."

When you just see someone completely in the present moment, body plus consciousness, do you get more of a sense of their ability to move, to open, to change, to transform? Could you get that for yourself as well?

And what about between personal history and body plus consciousness—which evoked more compassion?

"The history."

The history. Is that generally true for people? When we think about people's circumstances and all the events in their life that have led up to their present circumstances, we often feel a lot of compassion for all the ups and downs in people's lives. Sometimes that sense of compassion can be overwhelming and it goes into the near enemy of compassion, a little bit of overwhelm. So we might experience this for our friend, we might experience it for ourselves. If that happens, that's kind of an indication—okay, might be the time to shift out of the personal history and into this other way of looking.

In the whole of the Buddha's teachings, these two ways of looking fall under what I would call conventional understanding and ultimate understanding. Conventional involves concepts. Even to designate someone as a person is a concept. To say there's a being is a concept. There's no being. There's only form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. When we say "being," we're already using conventional designation. And then when we review someone's history, that's the creation of memory. So it can really help us understand how someone has lived their life, what's happened to them, all the

grounds for compassion.

Is personal history always reliable? The things we fabricate through memory are maybe sometimes true, sometimes really true, sometimes not so clear. So this personal history reflection is useful, but I would say don't believe in it ultimately. Don't believe that you've absolutely got it right. We remember things wrongly about our own past. We remember things wrongly about other people's past. So it's useful to evoke compassion, but hold it with a little bit of questioning.

And then coming back into the present moment and just seeing a body and consciousness, the doors are really open. Anything can happen in the next moment, not limited by personal history or what's gone before.

I actually use this reflection on body plus consciousness a lot. Sometimes for myself, if I feel like I'm getting entangled in something related to the past, I feel like I'm getting captivated by the past, I'll go to body plus consciousness and I'll see it's just an invention. That tie to the past is just an invention. And then I come into the present, everything's open again.

Or when you're with someone else, recognize that you have two ways of seeing them. For those of you who work with people, you can respond either from the point of view of personal history, or you can respond from the perspective that there's just the present.

That reminder—there's just the present—can sometimes really help people come back out of their involvement with their own past. But you have to be careful with it because you don't want to override compassion. Generally, the conventional view supports compassion. The ultimate view supports freedom. As you go back and forth, you realize you have the option every moment to see yourself and to see others in either one of these ways.

This becomes a really interesting exercise. You can view people from either point of view, and they both have their validity, their applicability, reasons to bring them in, reasons not to bring them in. Get skilled in looking both ways. Then you can resolve your own attachment to the past, you can help resolve others' attachment to the past, or you can stay on that level of personal history if compassion is the most important response.

Obviously, the wisdom aspect here is the emptiness aspect. Body and consciousness—that's basically all that's going on. And of course, mind states are there and important, but they come and go so quickly, they're like waves.

Do you have any questions or comments?

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