Refuge in Calmness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 48:03

This evening I'd like to speak about finding a refuge in calmness.

Some years ago, Eiken Roshi, a very wise American Zen teacher, was leading a retreat. On the second evening, he came into the hall to give the evening talk and began by saying, "The difficulties you are experiencing now." And then he stopped.

There was a very pregnant pause. The students suddenly looked very hopeful and alert. You can appreciate, even on the first evening of a retreat—never mind the second evening—the kind of space you can be in as you begin a retreat, where it seems that every hindrance that's ever been written about is occurring in your experience. The kind of space when you've perhaps completely forgotten why you ever wanted to come on retreat. The kind of space you can be in where it feels like this retreat is going to last for the rest of your life, and your body and mind is shouting at you.

So this pause seemed very important. What was he going to say? Was he going to offer some kind of magical solution or a shortcut through all of the challenges? Was there going to be good news about the ways in which the obstacles were going to disappear? Or maybe he was just going to announce a side trip to the beach?

But he began again and said, "The difficulties you are experiencing now are going to be with you for the rest of your life."

It's a wonderful line—not a statement that's intended to depress you or lead you to a state of despair or feel that everything is hopeless. But it is a statement that invites us to reflect a little bit upon our relationship to this moment and to many moments in our life.

What if this were true? What if it was true that the difficulties you are experiencing now were going to be with you for the rest of your life? What would be asked of us? What kind of inner shift or change would need to take place in our heart and mind that would allow us to turn towards whatever is present in this moment, no matter how difficult or painful or challenging?

What kind of shift would have to happen that would enable us to embrace and to hold this moment as it is, with calmness and balance and grace? What qualities of heart and mind would we need that would allow us to befriend and to learn from and open to whatever is happening right now for us in our experience? What would be needed to allow us to be with what is without rejection or judgment or fear, and without the thoughts that are always relying upon the promise or guarantee that a better moment is on its way?

What kind of acceptance or compassion would we need to bring to this experience, to our lives, so that we would feel that we are no longer just swept away by the many challenges we meet?

Many times we find ourselves in the reality of situations that we don't know when or if they will ever end—illness, sometimes a breakdown of our bodies, sometimes difficulties in our relationships, sometimes conflicts that have seemed to go on in our lives for a very long time, sometimes feelings within ourselves that are hard to accept. Many of us have these corners, these places in our lives where the truth is that we don't know if or when they will ever end. They are not something that is unique to retreats.

There's a wonderful story about a monk who lived in China near a small village, living a very simple life, yet with a very close relationship to the people in the village. In times of prosperity and peace, the villagers would have great affection for this monk. They would visit him and express their gratitude and appreciation for his presence and the sense they had of how he was protecting them and guiding them in their lives. In the midst of all this praise and affirmation, the monk would say to them, "That's amazing."

Then, of course, things changed and there was poverty and conflict in their land. The crops failed and the villagers went to the monk and said, "You're really a useless monk. You failed us. You betrayed us. Whatever happened to these powers you used to have? You may as well disappear. You're no use to us." And he answered them again, "That's amazing."

Then, of course, things changed again. There was once more peace in their land and harmony in their village and prosperity. They went to the monk to beg his forgiveness for the ways they'd abused him and reviled him, saying they hadn't really meant it, that it was all just due to the stress of the moment, and that they really did appreciate his presence. And he answered again, "That is amazing."

This story is about balance.

We live in a very agitated world, a very restless world, a world that sometimes seems exceedingly chaotic with extraordinary levels of disharmony. We live in a world that is constantly changing and unpredictable. It is hard to find anything that is guaranteed. At times, the agitation we see in the world around us feels like a mirror of the turmoil and turbulence we also experience in our inner world.

Consider the changes we go through in a single day. You've probably tracked that today. Our feelings can change so quickly. Times when our sense of excitement turns to total boredom. Where what we love in one moment we can hate in the next. We can be desperately waiting and wanting to go and sit in one moment, and in the next we can be thinking of the countless ways we may be able to avoid it. We see at times our happiness turns to sadness.

Even in our world of thoughts, you may have noticed today, thoughts that can seem so convincing and real in one moment—you may have had a little storm of obsession at some time today about some disaster or other—so convincing, and we've forgotten them by lunchtime. We see the changes, the unpredictability of the life of our bodies, the way in which our health can turn to illness, from strength to weakness so

unpredictably.

Within this world of change and turbulence, it does often feel that there is nowhere to rest, nowhere that is truly a haven, a sanctuary, a refuge. At times, it feels that there may be so little that we can rely upon anywhere.

What we discover in our lives and in our meditation is that we are not in control. We discover this over and over. We seem to get somewhere in our practice, a moment of calmness, a moment when we have relief from the endless commentary. We feel that we're arriving, we're finally making some progress, and the next moment it disappears.

We tend to be rather slow learners around this issue of control. Slow to get the reality that this is an undeniable truth in our lives, that we are not in control. Sometimes we are slow in learning that our attempts to control the uncontrollable and to grasp the ungraspable actually creates for us yet more fear and turmoil and struggle.

What meditation does is teach us about our lives. It teaches us about the nature of uncertainty. Do you know what the next thought you will have will be? No. Do you know what the next feeling that will arise in you will be? Can you choose it? No. Can you say to yourself or give instructions to yourself, "Oh, yeah, it's time for a little bliss. I'll have that now"? Or can you say to yourself, if an angry feeling or a thought of anger comes, "No, not today. I'm not up for this today," and it's just going to disappear?

Do we know what the next moment will bring for us, whether it's going to be some delightful body sensation, an ecstatic mind state, or will it be a burning resentment and doubt? We don't know. This state or this experience you are in right now—do you know when it will end, if ever?

There are real limits to our willpower and control. Sometimes we come on retreats and we think this is the right time for resolving this particular issue in our life or making this decision, and it doesn't even arise. Sometimes we come on retreats thinking we've resolved all those issues and made all those decisions, and countless ones arise.

Not knowing, uncertainty—this is the truth of our lives. And what do we do with that space? How do we respond? It is certainly one of the most challenging spaces to be with.

This illusion of control or being in charge is one of our most highly prized treasures. And often we don't want to see what an illusion it is. Recently in Time Magazine, which tends to be one of my major sources of information, I read that we have a new word for delusion, and it's called being "reality challenged." But sometimes around this issue or question of control we are indeed reality challenged. We don't want to see it as an illusion.

That is actually the nature of delusion, that we don't want to see something as being an illusion. Because to see this whole notion or issue of control as being transparent would actually really challenge and threaten

perhaps many of our positions and strategies that we hold onto so desperately in our lives for safety and identity and security. We really hold at times very close to our hearts the desire to be able to say, "I know something," or "I am something," or "I have something."

I wonder if you've ever found yourself curious about the commentary that goes through your mind in a day. Have you noticed today as you walk around this place how many words we have, how many descriptions we create? Sometimes it feels almost automatic, even compulsive, to offer a little commentary about everything. The world is not inviting it, and yet we find a certain security in being able to say, "I know something." These are our attempts to make the unknown familiar to us.

Recently I watched a wonderful documentary about someone who wanted to explore what it felt like to spend time in solitude in the Arctic. He was taken by dog sled to a place far beyond any human habitation and left there with a tent and supplies—everything he needed to survive. The arrangement was that a helicopter would come every few days to bring him supplies, and he had his own video camera to film himself.

On the first day, he was speaking to the camera about how humbled he felt, how awed he was by the vastness of this space. He talked about looking out and seeing no fences, no boundaries, no marks of it belonging to anyone. He spoke about that sense of wonder, the universality of that space.

A few days later, when the helicopter crew came to deliver supplies, he started complaining about them walking on his snow. After they left and returned the next time, they were surprised to see that he'd erected a fence of tape around his tent and made himself a yard.

This seems ridiculous, but I hope we can smile at our own behavior when we come on retreats. Sometimes we arrive at this universal space—one of the blessings here is that it really doesn't belong to anybody and belongs to everybody. Yet it's not unusual that after a day or so, we start becoming territorial. "That's my walking space." "What is that person doing sitting in my favorite chair in the dining room?" "What happened to my mug—my favorite mug that should be waiting for me on the shelf?"

We begin to mark out our own little spaces. We want that sense of safety and control. Sometimes this includes wanting very definite ideas about who we are, even though the truth is that those very definite ideas become the very definite traps we fall into in our lives.

We have such a vast vocabulary about ourselves: "I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm a good yogi, I'm a terrible yogi, I'm old, I'm young, I'm loving, I'm aggressive." We also have all these appendages about what we have—our possessions, our experiences. They become like treasures that we hold very closely.

What is happening in that movement within us is often that we are looking for a refuge. We are looking to grasping, to holding, to be our refuge—to provide sanctuary for ourselves in a changing and uncertain world. We believe perhaps on some level that grasping and holding will protect us, will provide a safe haven, until we look more clearly and deeply and see that our grasping is also subject to change and offers

no protection against uncertainty. Often we are looking to grasping and holding to provide something that is impossible for them to do.

Underneath those movements of grasping lies that longing in us to find a refuge—a very genuine, heartfelt longing to find a place of ease, a place where we can simply be. Yet we sometimes become confused about how that refuge will come to us. I think we become confused because of fear and anxiety.

When we feel disconnected, separate from the rhythms of life and from life's truth, when we feel out of touch with the nature of life and ourselves, we often feel anxious and fearful. So we see the refuge we're looking for—that refuge of calmness—as somehow a destination we'll arrive at when we've found something reliable, when we reach a place where we won't be disturbed or challenged anymore. We come to believe that our refuge relies upon getting rid of the difficult, the sorrowful, and the disturbing.

There are obvious problems with this belief. The most obvious is that our refuge becomes endlessly separate and apart from this moment, a destination we feel unlikely ever to reach.

This search for a sense of refuge is worth reflecting on. A true refuge, a refuge of calm abiding—if it is genuine, if it is authentic—cannot lie as some future destination. Instead, that refuge will be found in the way we are present in the midst of the challenging, in the midst of the uncertain, in the midst of the difficult. Our refuge will not be found when the difficult or uncertain ends, but through our willingness to open and learn to find balance in all the moments of our life.

The fear and anxiety evoked in us through encountering the uncertain and changing is not something to run from. Fear and anxiety can be friends and allies. They can teach us and inspire us to look more deeply, to discover and question what a true refuge is, what an authentic refuge is. They invite us to ask ourselves: Is there a way we can embrace all the rhythms of our lives—change and uncertainty, praise and blame, gain and loss, success and failure? Is there a way we can embrace all of this without ever losing our sense of balance?

It seems to me that this exploration is really at the heart of every spiritual journey. This path is not all that concerned with having profound states of concentration or dazzling experiences or arriving at some ideal destination. Rather, this path is actually concerned with turning towards ourselves and turning towards this moment. This is also the greatest challenge of this path.

Think about what is happening here for you. We have a body. Sometimes our bodies are complaining, sometimes they're distressed. This is happening to our bodies throughout our lives. We are faced with a mind that at times feels riotous and unsettled, which can feel full or feel very heavy—this mind is a companion all through our lives. We are faced with a whole range of feelings: joy and happiness and peace, but also feelings of sorrow, of rejection, of negativity. This is the whole range of feelings that we meet in our lives.

We are faced with moments where there feels to be little reliability—when calmness gets swallowed by

agitation, when a moment of peace is followed by a moment when we feel that every single thing is wrong. These moments are not unique to retreats. They happen in our lives, they happen in our meditation, they happen to all of us. How do we respond? How do we respond to these moments?

Sometimes our response takes the form of trying to jump into the next moment. When we are faced with the disturbing or the difficult, we think, "How can I get away from this? When is it going to be over? How can I make it end?" Sometimes when we're faced with the difficult, our mind might take the twist of trying to figure out where it came from. Where did these feelings come from? Where did these thoughts come from? Why are they here? What have I done to deserve all this?

We see that many of our ways of responding to the difficult are ways that actually invite a storm of stories, a storm of thinking about what we are experiencing—a storm of thinking that involves strategies about how to fix it, how to move away from it. We tend to see moments of challenge or difficulty as obstacles, as bad signs that somehow reflect on us badly. In those moments of difficulty, we are inclined to think in terms of failure, of being a spiritual disaster. And so we look for refuge in their endings.

Sometimes we are successful in trying to turn away and divorce ourselves from what is happening in the moment. Sometimes we can go to sleep, eat something, invite some really intriguing fantasy in, or get involved in some juicy planning session. Temporarily it seems to remove us or distance us from that which challenges us. But is it peaceful? Is it actually a refuge of calmness of being? Or is it simply a postponement and an acceleration or a reinforcing of fear? Will we say at the moment of our death, "I don't like this, I think I'll turn on the TV"?

In these moments of change and challenge, aversion and avoidance and numbness don't rescue us. Very often a very deep change, a very heartfelt change and transformation, a shift in attitude is called for if we are truly going to learn the skills and the art of being with, of turning towards what is actually happening in every moment of our lives. A very deep shift in our hearts is needed if we are really going to find a refuge within ourselves and in the midst of all that is occurring. And it is possible for us to do this.

One thing we can be sure of is that we are not going to find that sense of refuge, of calm abiding, within the contents of our minds, our feelings, or our bodies. We are not going to find a refuge within the variety of thoughts or images or memories or sensations or likes or dislikes.

What happens when we do that? What happens when we get so entangled in the contents of what we are experiencing? We very rarely find calmness. Instead, more often what we find is agitation and busyness. We find ourselves in that very familiar position of always trying to fix, trying to alter, trying to control, trying to make things different—always in the position of the doer, operating according to our likes and dislikes. We're looking for the perfect experience, and for us, that means the undisturbed experience. But sadly, it's like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

You know, I think it's so interesting to track this in our meditation. Sometimes we perhaps, on the first

day, feel very dull or very agitated. And we really think, "Aha, this is no good. I've got to get somewhere else." So we struggle with it and work with it. And maybe we get rid of it. For a moment we're happy.

But then we think, "Well, is this peace? This is kind of boring. Something else should be happening. This is not quite satisfying enough. Surely I ought to be having a really profound experience here. And then I'll be content."

Sometimes in our practice we really need to find and nurture and develop the trust and patience to let go of the contents a little bit. It's okay if there's dullness. It's okay if there's agitation. It's okay if there's aversion. It's okay if there's resistance. It's okay if there's fantasy. This doesn't mean that we're necessarily reinforcing these states or buying into them or inviting them to linger forever. We're not making this into some sort of permanent home. But it is as it is.

There's another way of being where we're not quite so entangled with our judgments and evaluations around that content. We're perhaps looking to discover a little bit of a vaster, bigger, more heartfelt space to rest in that is actually so allowing of all that content—a way of being present where there is spaciousness, where there is clarity, that is not dependent on the what of what is happening.

There's a wonderful story of a Tibetan yogi called Milarepa who, as the story goes, trained initially to be a sorcerer and inflicted much harm through black magic. Beginning to feel tremendous remorse and suffering over his actions, he decided to travel a new path. He went to find a teacher and found the teacher Marpa, saying he wanted really to let go of the suffering of his life.

Well, Marpa didn't just instruct him to find his zafu and sit down and meditate. Instead, he got him building towers. Single-handedly, he would instruct Milarepa to build these huge towers out of stone. Imagine—it's not easy work. So Milarepa would do this and build these towers. And every time, just as the tower came near completion, Marpa would come along and say, "No, Mila, that's not quite what I had in mind. That's not quite where I meant you to build it." Then he would have to tear down the tower and go and start over again, building another tower. And again, just as it was nearing completion, Marpa would come along and say, "Too bad, Mila, really, again it's not quite what I wanted."

This was his practice: building towers, taking down towers, building towers, taking down towers. There's something that happens through that kind of practice. It's about patience. It's about being with just what is. It's really about not being so concerned with the towers or stories that we construct and build, but with that quality of being that is so unconditional.

This is a very profound breakthrough in meditation—learning what it means to be with what is. To have the patience and the openness and the balance where our sense of being is really not so dependent, not so reliant upon the what of what is happening.

Now, what are the qualities of heart and mind that really are a shift? What really allows us to find this quality of spaciousness and refuge within our own capacity to see? One of those qualities is a loving and

compassionate acceptance that embraces every single moment without distinction.

As long as there is aversion, there is separation, distance. Think of that here. Perhaps you felt aversion today towards a sensation in your body, or towards a mind state that's arisen, or towards another person, maybe towards yourself just generally. What happens when there's that aversion? We feel very separate. We don't want to be with. We don't want to be close. We want to be distant.

And yet also, what is one of the ingredients, one of the primary characteristics of that feeling of separateness?

Wherever it occurs in our lives is fear. We fear that which we feel separated from. It feels like an enemy, like an opponent. And sometimes we very much preserve separation through resistance and through judgment. These are almost like the servants of separation, our resistance and judgment. They serve to keep us apart.

And there is a real art and a real skillfulness in actually learning to let our judgments and resistances be. You don't have to do anything with them. You don't have to make them into something different. You don't have to make them better. You don't have to make them more spiritual. You don't have to get rid of them. But to learn to let them be.

And how do we do that? By not fueling them. The primary fuel for judgment is thought. Thought that is charged with feelings of aversion. It is the fuel that makes them continue.

A lot of this practice is about learning to withdraw blame. To learn to allow all things to be as they are. Loving and compassionate acceptance does not mean a kind of blindness or condoning, but it does mean a willingness to allow and to listen. Sometimes that loving and compassionate acceptance means a simple willingness to stay present with whatever is happening just as it is.

Think of having a thought of anger, for example. Maybe someone's crossed your walking path today. And that thought comes up. Maybe they've done it before, which is even worse. That thought comes up, "Oh, they're like this. There's such an insensitive person, such an unmindful person." Now in this context, that thought is often followed by another thought, which says, "I am so judgmental. Why am I so judgmental?" The aversion keeps it going, doesn't it? It keeps the thinking going. It is the fuel.

Now what happens if we just, instead of fueling it, let it be. Just let it be. Stay simply present. There is no fuel. There is no foothold. We learn to be present in a loving and compassionate way, which actually liberates all things. It liberates all things to unfold. It liberates ourselves to unfold.

If you think of the seasons of nature—summer and winter and autumn and spring—we wouldn't think that it would be a path of wisdom to shout at winter and say it should be summer. We wouldn't think it would be a path of wisdom to go outside today and say, "Why are you cold? It's the middle of summer. You shouldn't be cold." It is as it is, isn't it? It is as it is.

It is somewhat similar within ourselves. The Buddha once said that all things arise because of conditions. All things arise because of conditions. This is a wonderful pathway for withdrawing blame. All things arise because of conditions.

Sometimes due to our own conditioning, our mind and heart has been shaped in particular ways. Sometimes through that shaping there are thoughts and feelings that arise that may be angry, that may be unkind, that may be reactive. It is no wisdom to shout at them and to say you should be different. There is a wisdom in appreciating the roots and the history of those thoughts and feelings. Appreciate that all things arise because of conditions.

But there is also tremendous wisdom in really appreciating the way that we cultivate the shape of our own heart and mind in this moment through how we are present.

Through how we are present, we are actually transforming the shape of our own heart and mind so that it owes itself not so much to history or conditioning, but rather finds its form rooted in attention—in a loving, caring attentiveness, in acceptance and in being present. A different climate of heart and mind emerges that frees our own inner seasons to unfold.

Discovering a refuge in our lives, a place of calm abiding, also asks us to cultivate the art of non-dwelling, of non-stickiness, of not taking hold of anything. We learn this art in our meditation by returning over and over to the simplicity of this moment, the simplicity of one breath. We are actually learning one of life's most important arts—the art of non-stickiness, the art of non-dwelling, the art of allowing all things to be.

We can see there actually are many options in our lives. Sometimes we sit and walk here in retreat, and especially in the beginning, it seems like there are so many thoughts—countless thoughts. Sometimes it seems there are so many places we could become entangled, and do get entangled. Sometimes we want to struggle with that mind. We don't need to struggle with it. We're not trying here to have a particular kind of mind or a perfect mind. What we are actually trying to develop is a more intuitive way of seeing and contacting and connecting and understanding through being simply present.

That connection with the more intuitive way of seeing is really nurtured through non-dwelling. But this takes a commitment on our part. There's a lot of juice in those stories and thoughts—a lot of juice. It takes a true commitment to say, "Let it be. In this moment, let it be." Come back to this simplicity of direct connectedness and trust that through that, the intuition and understanding we so much seek will be found.

Meditation is about learning to touch all things with calmness—learning to touch all things with calmness, our thoughts, our bodies, our feelings. As we learn to touch all things with calmness, everything begins to settle, begins to slow down a little, begins to become more visible to us. In grasping hold of nothing, we are also not grasped.

Patience is a big part of this. Sometimes in the Tibetan tradition they call it the long enduring mind, which

sounds a little difficult or unpleasant, but it's about patience—about patience, acceptance, being with. It means not thinking about results or completions or arrivals, not thinking about how much nearer we're getting to our destination or how much we're progressing or how much we've gotten rid of or how far we have to go.

It means that there's really only one moment that we need to attend to and only one moment that asks for our care—and that's the moment that we are in. In actually providing and offering that care, we also find our refuge in that moment. A refuge of calmness, a refuge of balance, and a refuge of understanding.

Thank you.

If we have a couple of moments quietly together.

May our beings live with calmness.
May our beings live with balance.
May our beings live with understanding.

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