Our Karma Is Our Dharma: Family Course 1997

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 47:17

Our life is really our practice. It's truly nothing other than this. Whether we're sitting for days on end in an intensive meditation retreat, or we're practicing in the midst of our family life, in the midst of our work life, in the midst of our play life—practicing in the midst of all the many and varied aspects of our life as a householder, which may or may not include periods of formal sitting meditation practice as well.

It's said that during the time of the Buddha there were many householders who became fully enlightened right in the midst of it all. We might not hold out for this possibility, or we might not hold on to this possibility—at least not too tightly. But we certainly do wake up over and over again in hundreds of small and bigger ways as we deepen in our relationship to our life as our practice. It's an inevitable fruit of this intention of ours to make our life our practice. Our karma is our dharma, actually.

One of the primary means, the primary skills—a particular quality of mind and heart that provides the ground for awakening, provides the fertile ground for insight to blossom in moments of our life—is what's called mindfulness. It seems now that mindfulness has become quite a commonly used word. In an intensive retreat I sometimes refer to it as having become a household word. How fortunate for us that it's a household word.

What is it really? What is it? And what is it that makes mindfulness a spiritual practice—this very incredibly powerful, helpful, and protective skill?

Mindfulness is a non-judging, non-manipulative, non-grasping or non-clinging, non-rejecting orientation to the present moment—any present moment. It's also meeting the moment with interest, with energy, meeting the moment with an interested curiosity.

So what is it that makes this flavor of meeting the present moment a spiritual practice? When we're so present in this way, there's an openness. There's room. There's a great spaciousness of heart, great spaciousness of mind, even if just briefly. There's a calmness. There's a spaciousness. And in this, there's room for clarity to arise, for insight, for true understanding to arise, which in a truly mindful moment is actually inevitable. It will arise.

Wisdom quite spontaneously arises. We don't have to do anything to make it happen. Wisdom, true understanding, isn't very far away at all. In fact, it's right here. It's ever present. It's not something we have to go after. It's not something we have to attain. In a sense, all we have to do is create the right conditions for this very natural occurrence to just simply happen. One of the primary occurrences is the development of a mindful attention—a mindful attention to the moments in our life, any moment in our

life.

It's not just in intensive retreat time that we develop mindful moments. Right in the midst of any occurrence, any situation, and sometimes in the most unlikely, seemingly mundane occurrences, with mindful attention, with a presence, a mindful presence, deep understanding can arise—or a strengthening, a broadening, an expanding of understandings that have already come to us.

I sometimes think of mindfulness as magic, actually, but not the kind of magic that the magician performs that takes us into the illusion and sweeps us into it and holds us in it. Rather, it's the magic of mindfulness that takes us out of the illusion, out of the delusion, right directly into the midst of reality. It sometimes feels like magic when this happens, when we see so clearly and when we're no longer caught in the veils of illusion.

Just recently, last week actually, I came home to my house up in the mountains in Taos about four o'clock in the afternoon after a busy day, ready to settle down and prepare a Dharma talk for our Thursday evening sitting group that night. I was in the house for a few moments and I heard what sounded like rain coming down the heat stove pipe. There weren't any clouds outside. I looked out—there wasn't even a cloud over my little house. But it sounded like rain coming down my heat stove pipe.

I busied myself with some things, and in a few moments I noticed that there were dozens of small flying red ants beginning to cover the carpet in my house and cover the floor. They were coming out of the heat stove—dozens of them, and then hundreds of them, and then it seemed like there were thousands of them. My carpet was a kind of pulsing...

aliveness of red ants. It was quite amazing. Thoughts, of course, started coming very quickly. What to do? I have a Dharma talk to write, and these ants are here, and I can't write my Dharma talk, and how am I going to get rid of them?

Maybe I'm going to be eaten alive in my own house. Anger arose at the ants for taking up the time and the space that I was supposed to be preparing this inspiring talk for students that night.

At some point I noticed that the ants were in this great vibrating swarm covering my carpet—literally thousands of them, I think. I didn't count. They were moving towards the light, moving in the direction of the windows and the doors. This was interesting to me because they couldn't see, but they had a sense.

At one point, I started feeling very much in the minority. There was just one little me, this little person, and thousands and thousands of these ants. Fear came up. I thought, I'll have to leave. That was the point where I thought, maybe I'll get eaten alive in my own house. The mind is pretty tricky, actually.

All of this was happening very quickly, and I thought, I can't kill these ants. I just can't do it. In fact, the thought of it and seeing the life force there on my carpet, the thought of killing them all made me nauseous. So I knew I couldn't do that, but what to do?

I called my landlord and reached her on the phone. She said that the same thing had happened to her last spring. The ants make a nest in the stovepipe, and on a nice warm summer day after a rain, they hatch. You know how anthills are—there are thousands of ants in an anthill. They come down the stovepipe and also go up the stovepipe, and they came into the house out of all the openings in my wood stove. The thing to do was to close up the stove with saran wrap and tape.

So I busily set myself to doing that. But I also needed to get rid of them. I didn't know what to do because I couldn't kill them. So I decided to vacuum them up. I vacuumed them all up. It took a couple of hours. The whole thing took about two and a half hours. I vacuumed them all up and then took the vacuum cleaner bag outside and opened it up and let them go into where they really wanted to be anyways, out into the open, natural world.

At the end of the two and a half hours, it was time for me to leave for my sitting group. And I hadn't written a Dharma talk. But it occurred to me somewhere along in that process that my karma was going to be my Dharma that night—that this whole experience would be the perfect thing to take to the students, which I did, and which I'm bringing here now.

There was an incredible amount of understanding and insight that came in the midst of all of this strange phenomena happening in my life—strange and seemingly quite mundane phenomena.

When the ants were moving towards the light, that very innate, very deep instinct towards staying alive, I could feel it. I could feel it in their movement and in their very intuitive sense of moving towards the light, towards the outside. And I could feel that in my heart, a kind of tug, a kind of quivering in my heart of knowing that too, knowing that same feeling, not different from what was happening with this pulsing life on my carpet.

I also felt, off and on through that couple of hours, the preciousness of human existence—kind of two aspects of that. One is that we really are a rare species. If you think of how many just ants there are in the world, let alone other insects and other creatures, there's not very many of us humans. We're a pretty rare species in this world. And I was really feeling it quite graphically in the midst of my living room as being a minority among thousands.

The other aspect of precious human existence that came up for me was a very ancient teaching that I remembered again about precious human existence, which I'd like to read to you. It said that

Those who have a precious human existence and have the opportunity to practice the Dharma in this precious human existence are as rare as daytime stars.

There's also an ancient teaching story that I remembered in the midst of this that speaks to me deeply. It says that if all the world were water and a golden ring were thrown upon the water to be blown about by the winds, a blind turtle, surfacing once every hundred years, would put its neck more easily into that ring than you would obtain a precious human existence.

And so now that we have obtained this precious human existence, to not set out on the path of practice that leads to freedom would be more wasteful than a poor man who finds a house filled with precious jewels and who didn't do anything meaningful with them but just frittered them away.

The first precept of not killing was very potent for me that afternoon during those hours with the ants. The Dharma talk that night was very lively and pertinent in many ways for the people attending. My karma became our Dharma that night, thanks to the ants, and thanks to the magic of mindfulness right in the midst of it all.

One of the most potent pieces of practice that we're given in our household life—and very powerfully through our children—is the teaching and practice of impermanence, which is really the bedrock of the Buddhist teachings. This was the initial insight that impelled the Buddha to leave the palace where he was born and raised, in search of a path to enlightenment.

In our formal meditation practice, we learn to see and surrender to the fleetingness of the moment—a breath, a thought, a sensation in the body, a feeling arising and changing and passing again and again. Our children are such wonderful teachers for us in this seeing and surrendering to change. We keep learning over and over through our children, with our children, to just let go, to let go so that their ever-changing nature may unfold.

Our children continuously remind us to loosen our mindset about who we think they are or who we think they should be or who we think they could be. They continually remind us to pay attention when we get stuck or when we forget, as they just continue becoming who they are.

My youngest son, who today is thirty years old, used to look me right in the face and say—nicely, or at least fairly often nicely—"Mom, you don't have to say that," or "Mom, you don't have to do that." He was my mindfulness bell many times as he was growing up. It surprised me, usually surprised me and woke me up. Occasionally he still does this to me in a very similar way—telling me to stop, pay attention, see who he is now, and then now, and then now, and to wake up to the present moment just as it is.

Kahlil Gibran said, "Your children are not your children. They are sons and daughters of life's longing for itself. They come through you, but not from you. And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you. You may give them your love, but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies, but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backward, nor tarries with yesterday."

This process of bringing children into the world and then raising them has seemed to me over the years basically a process of letting go—letting go in the midst of deep love, letting go in the midst of the heart of compassion, letting go with the very natural and growing wisdom that inevitably arises in and out of our intention to make our life our practice.

This is a poem by a man named Red Hawk. It's called "The Wheat Farmer Says Goodbye to His Only Daughter":

His heart cracks like parched earth to see her go, but he is not free enough to weep. So he walks with her this evening out in the summer wheat where the stalks beat softly. Suddenly in his fertile anguish, his heart blooms. And like the last mad king of wild wheat, he grabs his child and twirls her. Through the sea of grain, he whirls her. She holding tight, he boldly dancing in the moonlight. When at last they fall, he is winded and amazed. On his knees, he embraces her. And then she takes her leaving, like a wild wheat flower dancing, waving in the softly breathing wind. He watches her go, weaving, moving slowly through the moonlight. And he fingers ripened grain in calloused hand. There's just one thing to do now that his daughter is departed: to harvest cleanly and without regret. In this way he pays homage to the precious seeds he planted. One blooms by rooting and one by blowing away.

The potency of practicing impermanence is immediately accessible in our life as householders in an endless array of ways when we pay attention in any moment. All the changes in daily life—many of which we may have subtle or perhaps strong resistance to—reveal that much of the time we're actually practicing permanence, not impermanence. Much of the time we want everything to stay as it is, to continue as we know it, or to become the way we want it to be. So often we believe that we have control and that things will always remain the same or do what we want them to do.

But this belief is really only make-believe. As we begin to see more clearly, we discover that belief has little or nothing to do with reality. The tighter we grasp onto our beliefs, the more limited our life becomes. We often construct our lives on this flimsy, rickety foundation of make-believe—made-up beliefs built upon assumptions, sometimes misinformation, opinions, ideas about this and that—and we hold on quite tightly.

In reality, the very fabric, the very essence of life is change. So why do we fear and resist this perfectly natural phenomenon? Why do we struggle against change, the beginnings and endings, the births and deaths? Why can't we surrender to the truth of the moment? Why do we resist and fear so much of life?

Without impermanence, there would be no life. As Thich Nhat Hanh teaches: "If there is no impermanence, the grain of corn will remain a grain of corn forever, and you will never have an ear of corn to eat. Impermanence is crucial to the life of everything." So instead of complaining about impermanence, we might say, "Long live impermanence! Thanks to impermanence, everything is possible."

Can you imagine if nothing ever changed? It would be the most incredible nightmare. Looked at from this perspective, impermanence is actually an amazing natural marvel. All life on the planet is changing all the time. All life is dying in the same volume as new life is arising—the new life that brings such incredible joy and delight each spring, the new day that greets us each morning when we wake up.

William Blake wrote: "He who binds himself to a joy does the winged life destroy, but he who kisses the joy as it flies lives in eternity's sunrise."

As we look more closely at our own process—particularly at a time like this when there is more time and support to do so—as we explore more deeply by simply being with things as they are, we might begin to see that we've been living under what one teacher called an "assumed identity." The assumed solidity of our body and thoughts, the grasping and trying to hold onto these ephemeral thoughts, feelings, emotions—all these habitual fixations that we live with and believe and call our own, call "me," call "mine"—that we think define who we are.

As we practice formal meditation and live with mindful attention, we begin to see and experience more directly that things aren't necessarily as they appear—or at least as they have appeared until now. We begin to experience the whole thing as process happening, as changing sensations, changing feelings, as various manifestations of energy with different qualities, flavors, textures.

Again, our children are among the very best teachers in this respect, as they quickly manifest changing emotional states within just a few moments—changing likes and dislikes in the space of a breath.

As we deepen in our acceptance and understanding of change, of impermanence, our relationship to all forms, both inner and outer, begins to change. What might be a compulsive, addictive grasping—trying to hold onto the passing show—begins to loosen its strong attraction. Trying to control what is actually uncontrollable, this ongoing miracle of constant change we call life, begins to soften. We open our hands, so to speak.

We begin to see how excruciating it is to grasp so tightly. The fear underneath the impulse to control—the fear of being in and with life—begins to relax and open. The fear begins to weaken and fade as we surrender, opening to and surrendering more deeply to the truth of the moment. Now we're practicing impermanence.

Many of us have at times had a very strong identification with our face and body, how they looked when we were younger. My mother, who is eighty-five years old, sometimes stands next to me looking in the mirror—not as a planned event, but it just happens. One time we were looking in the mirror together at ourselves and each other, and she said, "I see an old woman. It's so strange."

And she kept repeating over and over again, "It's so strange, I see an old woman." Then she said, "I've changed so much. It's so strange to see." And then, "I've changed more than anybody. It's so strange." She said, "It doesn't match how I feel inside. It's so strange. So strange."

But what is strange? Stranger than what? This is life—life being lifey, life doing what it does, life doing its thing.

Have you ever stood in front of a mirror and looked at your face quite intently for a long time, just focused

your attention on your face? If you do, it keeps changing, just keeps changing. Whose face is this? Who is this face? Who sees? If you've never tried it or if you haven't done it for a long time, try it sometime.

In our life, our life is practice.

Another potent teacher—of course there are many—is the world of nature. A number of years ago I was here at the Meditation Center in the midst of a long retreat. This happens to be a story from a long retreat, but it could be at any moment in any of our lives, being outside and paying attention.

I was sitting out back watching the grasses. It was late fall and things were changing quite rapidly. I was watching the grasses, and over days particular blades of grass even—you know sometimes when you're on a long retreat you can get fixated on certain things. So I was watching these blades of grass changing. They were changing color, losing their color, changing shape, curling over, drying up. Just watching this happen in an intent way over the days.

Are we different than this? Really, are we different than this? No matter how much moisturizer we use, no matter how many vitamins we take or how much healthy good food we eat, no matter how much exercise we do, our skin dries out, our body changes shape, our hair loses its color. No matter how hard we try, we just don't stay young. This mass of skin and bones has its schedule to keep and there's absolutely nothing we can do about it.

This is from very wonderful Kalu Rinpoche, no longer alive—although he actually has been reborn: "We live in the illusion and appearance of things. There is a reality. We are that reality. When we understand this, we see that we are nothing. And being nothing, we are everything. That is all."

In our commitment and intention to make our life our practice, as our karma becomes our dharma, and with a deepening acceptance of the natural wonder of change and impermanence, this quite naturally leads us to the reality of interbeing, as Thich Nhat Hanh calls it. The reality of interconnectedness. The reality that we truly are everything. That as José said the other night, "I am because you are, you are because I am."

Again our family practice. Our children are such strong teachers.

We know from photographs taken of the development of the fetus in the womb that a baby—that each of us in the womb—goes through the various stages of evolution as cells multiply and develop into the human form. When my children were born, after they were born, as they were going through their developmental stages out of the womb, I found myself quite fascinated, quite amazed actually, as they again reflected the evolutionary stages of life on the planet.

I found myself calling them little fishy as they were lying on their bellies making swimming movements. Then they became little lizards or little snakes as they were squirming along the floor. Then frogs when they first began sitting hunched over in their round baby bodies. Then they turned into four-leggeds—the

slow moving kind at first, then into the speedy agile four-legged creatures.

And then finally they stood and moved into the upright, two-legged world of human beings. I actually hadn't paid very much attention at all to this process until I'd had my own children. I'd never really noticed it. This intimate observation and relationship, this connection to a process that is truly much, much bigger, much broader than what was taking place with my own children, was in moments an incredibly expansive, inclusive and awakening experience.

There's nothing left out, nothing left out in our family practice. Life is our practice, as long as we're willing to keep engaging and opening to the gifts.

Just a few weeks ago, I was teaching a retreat in New Mexico. A grandmother in her mid-sixties came in for an interview. In her work life, she's a high-powered politician in the Texas legislature. She told me that during this past year, a new grandchild was born into her family, and so she went to visit the family very soon after the birth took place. Her son and daughter-in-law let her hold the baby for almost the entire four days that she was visiting, and she cried actually for a good part of those four days with the baby in her arms. Her son thought something was wrong, but she assured him that, in fact, everything was quite, quite okay.

She told me that she had forgotten the incredible purity and the complete presence of the very young. She hadn't experienced this for a long, long time in her life in the political world. Her heart was simply opening again. She was crying tears of deep joy, touching this essentialness, this pure beingness, touching again what's sometimes called our original face. The baby was a reminder, a heart opening.

And along with this, there was an arising of the heart of compassion in her—compassion both for herself and for others. For how far away we can get from this, from this profound connection. How swept up in other important business we so often are.

This is from a Tibetan song of enlightenment called "The Flight of the Garuda":

"Knowing that this state is within oneself, how amazing that one searches for it elsewhere. Although it is clearly manifest like the radiance of the sun, how amazing that so few see it. No matter how much happiness and sorrow is experienced, how amazing that it is never impaired or improved in the slightest. This self-awareness is naturally free from the very first. How amazing that it is liberated by just resting at ease with whatever happens."

Our karma, our family practice, our commitment to relating to our life as our practice, and our children being maybe the strongest, most powerful teachers that we will encounter—this is our dharma.

I sometimes think of awakening as becoming a wise baby. The complete presence that babies, that very young children have in the midst of whatever is taking place inside them and around them. It's a pre-verbal, non-conceptual, total presence. Can we be so present, even for just a moment?

Granted, new beings don't have the capacity to understand conceptually. But we do. In our maturing selves, in any moment of pure presence, we have the capacity to understand, not out of our intellect, but the spontaneous intuitive wisdom that arises quite naturally if we're present in our lives with a mindful attention, present with a non-judging, non-manipulative, non-grasping or non-clinging, non-rejecting orientation to the present moment.

Maybe as we wake up, we become like a wise baby.

I'd like to close with a poem called "Hokusai Says." Hokusai maybe you know is the Japanese painter who painted that huge wave, great big wave that is pretty well known, pretty popular. This is a poem by Roger Keys:

"Hokusai says, look carefully. He says, pay attention, notice. He says, keep looking, stay curious. He says, there's no end to seeing. He says, look forward to getting old. He says, keep changing, you just get more who you really are. He says, get stuck, accept it, repeat yourself as long as it's interesting. He says, keep doing what you love. He says, keep praying. He says every one of us is a child."

Every one of us is ancient.
Every one of us has a body.
He says every one of us is frightened.
He says every one of us has to find a way to live with fear.
He says everything is alive.
Shells, buildings, people, fish, mountains, trees—wood is alive, water is alive.
Everything has its own life.
Everything lives inside us.
He says live with the world inside you.

He says it doesn't matter if you draw or write books.
It doesn't matter if you saw wood or catch fish.
It doesn't matter if you sit at home and stare at the ants on your veranda or in your living room, or watch the shadows of the trees and the grasses in your garden.
It matters that you care.
It matters that you feel.
It matters that you notice.
It matters that life lives through you.

Contentment is life living through you.
Joy is life living through you.
Satisfaction and strength is life living through you.
Peace is life living through you.

He says, don't be afraid.
Don't be afraid.
Look.
Feel.
Let life take you by the hand.
Let life live through you.

Let's sit together for just a moment.

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