Seeing Deeply Into Experience

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 47:24

The theme for this evening's talk is working with experience. In the flow and course of our days, the range and type of experiences that arise can vary considerably from one person to the next. These experiences can be pleasant, unpleasant, or somewhere in between.

Sometimes in the areas of pleasant experience, there's a certain kind of comfort that accompanies it. One flows quietly and easily through the day, but we don't notice when this is occurring. There can be a certain complacency in being in that kind of relative comfort zone, not realizing that in moving from sitting to walking to standing, eating, and listening, there's a fairly uniform level taking place as we go from one posture to the next, one moment to the next. Consciousness becomes quieted by that condition.

The general perception and thought that may arise regarding oneself in those times is that it's okay, it's nice, but really nothing is happening. For others moving through that field of pleasantness, there can at any time be a severe disturbance to that experience. One's mind is shaken up and begins to latch upon something—which we have been talking about over these days together. In that latching upon something, tension emerges from mind and body, along with the relationship to what's occurring.

When our experience is flowing along and then breaks, some reactivity comes, some tension comes, and it generates agitation within ourselves. With this agitation, we want to follow as clearly as we can: What do we typically do when we feel agitated? There's the agitation and the outflows from it, and the thinking can be, as it has always been, the means for getting over it. This can be all too typical. Sometimes it runs into doubt, into forms of escape, trying to see someone to solve it for us, thinking that we should be able to handle this all by ourselves.

When something impactful is going on, it will enliven other typical patterns that we have. We want to be noticing and aware not only of the agitation but what typically goes along with it—what is typical. If we recognize what is typical as unsatisfactory, then change in other ways and expressions will be necessary, sometimes going against the whole uniform way of relating.

To give you a small example: Yesterday evening, as I do on my visits here, I went to the Cambridge Insight Meditation Centre to give the evening talk. After the talk, during the question and answer period, one person said that she had felt angry all day. When asked why, she explained that she had engaged in a task at work, expecting that her colleague would want her to continue, but he had changed his mind and said no. She couldn't think of a reason why he should refuse her assistance or cooperation. She felt disappointed, hurt, and ultimately very angry with him, considering all the time, energy, and attention she had given to their previous project together.

So there's memory arising—we had worked on this before. From the memory came satisfaction in what was done. From the satisfaction came an expectation of renewal and continuity. When renewal and continuity weren't forthcoming, this affected her feeling inside. She felt agitated about it, angry. The anger was being carried around and directed at him. There's an impact process: effect and end result is feeling angry.

We explored this for a few minutes, and I asked her what she was going to do about it. She gave the usual responses that people often make in these matters—accepting, not judging—the typical Buddhist solution to everything. Sometimes one has to look completely around the other way. So my suggestion, in looking completely around the other way, was: Why not give him a gift? This is totally opposite to what the mind is doing.

She said it could feel manipulative in the face of all this, and I said, "Well, we've got between now and tomorrow to see through the manipulation and then give him a gift." Of course, we want to know what gift you're going to give him.

There's movement going on, a sequence, a typical way of looking at a situation. Then there's actually looking and asking ourselves: Could I go completely in an unfamiliar way, looking at it in a way which I've never before considered in my life? In the wish to arrest the mind, to allow something quite unusual from within to flower, we may find ourselves in that tension, in that difficulty, in that lack of acceptance, in agitation, unable to come up with an awareness or flash of insight or inspiration that totally goes against the familiarity of the mind.

But maybe in the tension and agitation, with some willingness just to stop and say, "I don't know what to do with this, but this certainly isn't the answer. This certainly can't go anywhere. I've been along this road so many times before"—in the conviction and determination to say "don't know what to do with this," not looking for some smooth operators like ourselves to give out a few pacifying solutions like "watch your breath for a little bit longer" or "send a bit of metta," but actually firming the mind up and saying "I don't know what to do with this."

Repeating that to oneself and bringing some conviction to it may generate just a little bit of space. We only want just enough to see if something can come out of that not knowing we've made for ourselves.

In a way, we make a kind of error of judgment and perception in these things. When something is tense and agitated and reactionary inside, when we're feeling irritable and hostile and negative, we all too quickly want some information, something to do in order to diffuse what we are doing with our mind, to bring in something else to help diminish that which we don't like. Of course, that resource and tool can obviously be useful and beneficial, but sometimes we look at ourselves and say, "I keep on doing that. I'm constantly looking to the books, constantly looking to methods and techniques, looking to instructions or guidance or wise advice, looking for a solution in some way or other."

Maybe we have to say to ourselves much more often: Here it is. This is what's going on. Pleasant, unwelcome, unwanted as it is, I don't know what to do with it. All I can say of myself is simply that I just don't know. Keep that steadfast, keep that clear not knowing there, and just live with it. Live with it. Whatever that burning issue might be, whatever it is will change. Things will be different. Life will go on, or one's life won't go on, but change will change.

The fretting and all that goes along with it, the attempt in this problem-solving mind where we keep thinking problem solving, improvement, problem solving—the culture's obsessed with it. Turn the attention away. Don't look for problem-solving devices. Stay steady with full, clear, unashamedly not knowing.

In attending to meditation, attending to mind and body, and finding a space that is opening and insightful to circumstances, there are also the beneficial experiences that arise. In association and contact with beneficial experiences—and Sharda was touching on this yesterday evening—there are two or three factors that deserve noticing and attention.

In the tradition, the Buddha has wisely spoken of seven factors of enlightenment, a skillful means for us to check in with ourselves: How's our relationship with each and every one of these? The first one is awareness itself, mindfulness. Those periods where we're just going along through the day can well be a kind of general mindfulness, a general consciousness from one situation to the next. But with that, to safeguard against any complacency that can occur, it's bringing the fullness of attention—as much as one can muster and draw out of one's cellular life—to clearness, to feeling, to sensing, to knowing clearness, to being extremely clear.

That might just be for one or two moments or minutes in the course of a sitting or walking, as if it was the last minute, as if there was nowhere else to go, as if nothing whatsoever could come out of it. Therefore, the clearness itself would have to be fulfilling unto itself, without any promises or additions or extra benefit in some future time. It would be it, without anything else.

We may well need this so that we're not just going mindfully through the day, but generating those moments and times where that clearness and firmness exists, where not a single sinew or cell of one's body intentionally moves. As the old monks of the tradition have said many times for many generations: When the little finger just moves for a moment, it disturbs the world of ten thousand things. One little movement affects everything everywhere.

Sometimes in our utter stillness, in our presence and transparency of our whole being, there's a clear seeing. It would be a pity, in such a privileged opportunity as we have here, to go mindfully through the day and misunderstand going mindfully through the day for the great value of one single extremely clear moment in which there's not a thought taking place, not an involvement with anything of the self taking place, no looking for anything, no reaching out for anything, no expectation of anything. Our whole existence has come to one complete halt in the moment, and nothing is going to come out of it because this

is it.

That can occur and happen for us in different times, in different moments during the day. One may say the thought arises during the time, immediately afterwards: "I can't see the point. I can't see why I should just have one single clear moment. What am I going to get out of it? What good is it going to do me or the world?" Sometimes the thought arises simply because it doesn't know how to relate to that kind of expansive and firm and decisive awareness—that it could make a difference to our life in ways that all our trying to organize it and have it straight and okay and orderly and as we would wish cannot. All the wishes that go along with that—the wishing may be no substitute for that kind of presence, making possible a glimpse of something that just being quietly mindful through the day may not give us.

In the flow and rhythm of the day, questions arise too, some from the small groups and one-to-ones, in terms of insight into all of these things. It can be that we don't always know in the moment, in the occurrence, what actually is insight, what insight is actually arising. In the seven factors of enlightenment, the second one is enquiry and investigation. If in the flow of our day, in our meditation—whether one's first time on a retreat or one is well seasoned and exposed to all these areas—if it's quietly going along and one says in that quietness, "Well, nothing much is happening, just going through the day," then it might well be quite necessary to generate some focus of interest, to draw out of oneself some exploration that really begins to sharpen one's attention up.

That can obviously take different expressions and different forms. When it's a matter of the heart in the sitting, what shows? The initial response of the mind might be, "God knows, I've no idea."

But one asks oneself again in the sitting, impeccably not doing anything for any one self or other: what shows the love?

This might manifest in taking the walking meditation and walking up and down. In this practice, outwardly one is going nowhere—just walking up and down. To anybody traveling from Petersham to Barry along that road, who have watched for the last twenty years, this appears a really bizarre group because they're walking up and down and going nowhere. The same disturbing thoughts can obviously arise in one's own mind.

But then the teachings speak to this. One of our dharma teachers in Germany titled her book from the text: "Being Nobody Going Nowhere." One might walk up and down and generate the enquiry: what is the significance of this? Not just taking it as some nice little phrase about non-self, but actually absorbing the significance of being nobody and going nowhere. Learning to live with it, walking up and down again and again until something starts moving inside, something begins to show and stand out.

If one does this, of course there's going to be risk. There's risk that you might get some insight. There's risk that you get agitated. There's risk that you might start thinking about all your roles in life and who you really are and what you really should be doing and where you're really going. That's the chance. If you

invite one thing in any enquiry, one might end up faced with precisely the opposite of who am I and where am I going—forgetting that the original question was being nobody with nowhere to go.

In the movement of walking up and down, or in the sitting, for some the process of meditation without introducing any reflection or enquiry is sufficient unto itself because one senses it. One senses the importance of keeping faith with meditating, keeping faith with clear awareness, keeping faith with the practices in a focused and dedicated way. This includes acknowledging periods of just mindfulness and acknowledging periods when agitations come and what's typical in those agitations.

But as I said, if it feels like a little drift—comfortable, rather nice, not extending oneself too much, always faithfully going for a second and third bowl of food, always leaving it to the last possible minute to walk into the meditation hall and being the first through the exit when the bell goes—all of this can help preserve the status quo of the comfortable self.

Sometimes we need to say to hell with this comfortable self. It's sowing the seeds for its opposite, because only wisdom gives comfort, only wisdom generates contentment of being. Sometimes we must say: rather than just going nicely and sweetly, let me extend. I want to know the immeasurable and really taste the sweetness and loveliness of it. Then I may have to extend myself a little bit from the finite towards the immeasurable.

That might include extending the sitting time, shortening the sleeping time, eating less food, staying up later. I won't be the first in meditators' history to have done that. In that extension and expanding out, there could be risk—risk that you hate doing it, risk that you feel even more agitated than before, risk that tiredness brings boredom and apathy, risk that you feel you're not getting anywhere and all the doubts arise. That's the risk if you extend.

But equally important, there is also the possibility that in taking the step and the risk, one does start opening out. One does break through. One does have a different sense of things. It might be that the barrier to that is actually much thinner than what one thinks. Sometimes just one precious single consolidated moment helps to show a wider sense, helps reveal that mind is a lousy reference point for knowing the truth of things because the mind keeps measuring—and therefore not a very good vehicle for knowing that which can't be measured.

With the areas of insight and understanding, there can appear to be significant time lapses between one and the other. What I mean is that in the course of hours and days here, experiences are going on. Some of them, as we talked about earlier in the enquiry, seem to matter more than others. We think that in certain experiences there's conviction, and we can feel quite assured about it. Meanwhile, something which was hardly noticeable, which we barely picked up on if at all, seems totally irrelevant, utterly inconsequential. When we were there, we didn't give it a moment's thought.

Some things we gave a great deal of thought, feeling, and experience to—from situations with the body to

states of mind and emotions. Something else was so far on the periphery of consciousness that we weren't turning attention to it, even to the point we didn't notice it at all.

But in the very nature of things, in the very unfoldment and scheme of things, what consciousness may determine and thought confirm may not be the truth—the actual reality of what proves to be significant. There can be, as I say, that passing moment hardly noticed if at all, and then days, weeks, months, years later it suddenly strikes one what that was, what had occurred, what the significance was, what the benefit was. That doesn't even have to come from any experience of oneself—it can be what somebody else said passing by in a small group meeting, or just something which one noticed for a moment outside.

So the function of awareness and enquiry, bringing the two together: if you and I are willing as much as we can to bring awareness to the ordinary and everyday, not only does it give us the chance to see and connect and be clear about now, but it's generating myriad conditions for a constant flowering of understanding—constantly being touched with existence. If you and I are as transparent as we can be—which means the diminishing of ego—if you and I are as transparent as we can be, we'll keep reflecting and mirroring life. We'll keep feeling the extraordinariness of it, the miracle of it, the expansiveness of it, the incomprehensibility of it.

That's why we keep bringing awareness, keep ensuring that there's the wish and determination to make genuinely clear moments for us. Then inner life becomes a mirror for it—a mirror for what keeps going on around. There's a transparency which is so transparent, it takes birth, death, ageing, sickness, death, and doesn't make such a thing about it.

All of this looking as we look into ourselves and deeper, the taking of risks in some of the ways I've just been speaking about—one important feature, certainly mirrored again in the seven factors of enlightenment, is the importance of happiness and joy, these qualities of the heart.

Quite often, and perhaps if there is any imbalance here it can be in an exaggerated way, we speak about the significance of equanimity—that steadfast present between the field of pleasure and pain, to be steadfast in the face of both. This means not constantly pulling oneself into the pursuit of pleasure and having and ownership which goes along with that, and not constantly living in aversion and fighting with pain. To find that steadiness between these two extremes, these two poles.

But it would be a pity and unfortunate, from our own capacity as human beings, to lose access to a great wellspring of joy and happiness. Sometimes criticism comes that there can be too serious a focus in these kinds of teachings. Sometimes when people are coming off the street, perhaps on their first retreat, arriving a day or two late, having never been inside this situation before—somebody else urged them to come and they think what was their motive in trying to get me here? Obviously their real motive was to get me out of the house for a week. The eyes look around and say, "Oh what a grim lot they all are. Obviously it's just a place for people who are utterly antisocial, a place suitable for misfits." One sometimes looks around and wonders.

All of this is the way the eyes interpret the perceptions. In that interpretation—both of oneself and others—generalisations can get made. But that interpretation may not reflect with accuracy the inner experience of people. A number of people in these situations do experience great love of the situation, and that brings great joy and happiness. There's not a single thought running in the mind from one day to the next wanting to be anywhere else, wanting to be doing anything else.

One knows the resource of the place, the sanctuary of the situation, the blessing of the occasion. Happiness flows in the heart with or without knee pains, with or without back pains. Therefore, a factor of an enlightened life is showing itself—happiness and joy just being in this world, going nowhere and being nobody, but opening to great love.

Others, equally dedicated to the Dharma and practice and teachings, will look at themselves and recognise the importance of equanimity, the importance of being clear, of generating time for some deeper enquiry inwardly and outwardly. But actually, the joy and happiness doesn't flow—it doesn't flow easily, doesn't flow freely in that respect. There is the contentment of being that can take place, and that's its own quiet and sublime joy, of course. But for some, we need to give the heart a little bit more opportunity to flow.

The traditional way this has been endorsed and encouraged is by reflections on the Triple Gem—the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha: the three gems of existence—awakening, the teachings, and the sangha of men and women of practice, past, present, and future. There's something beneficial in those kinds of recollections of how much dedication and love and commitment the generations of people on this earth have shown, doing exactly as we are doing as the living generation. I want to feel happiness at just participating. Or the recollection of a joyful communication with another, or the lovely things of nature which are there—all of that can help nourish and bring joyfulness and happiness into the heart.

All of that belongs and is integral to this whole body of teachings. It would be a pity really if some of those factors of awakening and enlightenment were being nourished but others were being neglected. Some people are very strong on mindfulness, no question. Sometimes we hear emphasis on the first factor—being mindful, being aware, paying attention moment to moment—and sometimes strong recollection and enquiry, but they may be undernourished and neglecting the joy of the practice, the contentment of it, the energy of it. Or maybe neglecting the equanimity.

From the standpoint of practice and our commitment to it, we need to attend to ourselves in such a way that we ask: in those areas of the factors of enlightenment, am I neglecting some? Am I putting too much on one or two at the expense of the others? Because the teachings never encourage that. It's a very wide, broad body of teachings, and it would be a terrible pity when—as is the danger—it gets reduced down to being a mindful human being as some kind of demonstration of what the teachings are about.

The teachings are about liberation. They are about awakening every factor of the whole being for that liberation and enlightenment.

All of that is included and very much embraced in the processes of what we are doing here. In the climate of sitting and walking, we don't get complacent, we don't drift, we don't just feel agitated and complain to ourselves about what's around us. We see the agitation, we see the relationship to it, and we dig deep.

If that digging deep means saying "I don't know" and just staying with that—knowing that the mind doesn't have the answer and the relationship of reactivity is no answer—we don't know. Right, we don't know, and we'll stay with that and see what comes from it.

So if one just takes some of those threads and themes which I have spoken about this evening, practice never gets boring. Never. It doesn't get dull, doesn't generate apathy, doesn't generate drift. One sees, my goodness, so much challenge to existence, so much challenge to the whole being. Those factors of enlightenment, the self and the I and the my which we have spoken about—all of it, tremendous grist for the mill.

Surely the application and exploration of all of that—what greater respect can a human being pay to herself or himself than to explore the full awakening of one's whole being? What greater act could one do than that?

Even in the most difficult times, let's never forget that the greatest act of kindness for humanity and for existence is to be so utterly conscious of it. This is the most significant thing we can do as we live and breathe.

May all beings live with awareness. May all beings live with realisation. May all beings discover a fulfilled life.

Let's have a couple of quiet minutes together.

Thank you for listening.

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So let's have a couple of quiet minutes together, please.

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