The Spiritual Warrior

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 45:34

One of the great and perennial questions on all paths is how do we relate wisely to the enormous life energies - the creative ones, the destructive ones, the confusing ones? How do we find some balance in the midst of it? And how in the midst of all of it do we stay true to what we most value? Rather than getting yanked around, do we have that quality of remembering so we really live what our hearts most genuinely cherish?

The word bodhisattva, as many of you know, means awakened being. And we are all bodhisattvas. We're all awakening. It's our nature to awaken. The bodhisattva embodies a balance of qualities. In the classic spiritual texts, they're called spiritual faculties. There's a number of them, and these qualities allow that expression of freedom which is our nature.

Last week, the talk was on the power of wakeful relaxation, which really is one of these faculties - the capacity to find tranquility, to relax into experience, so that rather than fighting what arises naturally in our awareness, there's a willingness to be with. There's a willingness to experience fully what's happening. So there's a real transformative power to that.

There's also a potential shadow side. Sometimes in service of relaxation, or we think we're relaxing, we're actually dulling out, trancing out, turning off the switch. We're not there experiencing in an alert way.

One of the balancing qualities that the Buddha talked about that is part of our development as awakening beings has been described archetypally as the spiritual warrior. This archetype exists in many spiritual traditions and describes that capacity to courageously face our lives and to be wholeheartedly committed to living our path, however we describe our path. It's that wholeheartedness of resolve and commitment that really lets us go for it in a sense. This is the energy of the bodhisattva. This is that energy that really allows for fully living.

The description that I can best put on this energy is that it's our life force. It's that basic will to live, that will to thrive or to be fully. It can be used to create and destroy civilizations. It can be used to heal, to repress, to work hard with, to strive, to awaken, to liberate. It can go in many different directions. It's the energy behind the flower that's blooming or the dog that's barking. It's basic life energy.

What determines which way this energy goes, what happens out of it, is really our intention. It's our aspiration. As you know, we have many layers to our intentionality. Some of them are that we want to be safe, so we have the intention towards safety, to defend ourselves, to have more pleasure in our lives, to be respected, to be recognized. We can put our energy behind any of those areas of motivation.

It's said that when the spiritual warrior is mature, their aspiration is that of the bodhisattva - that all circumstances may serve to awaken. The aspiration is for freedom of the heart and mind. What that means is that the entire energy of awakening is towards that. When the warrior is instead in the grip of greed or hatred or delusion, energy is quite destructive, as you know.

I'd like to read you a little story. Once upon a time, there was an elderly king, a kind and generous ruler of a peaceful and prosperous land. He was greatly loved by his people for his kindness and his wisdom. He was approaching his 80th year. His wife had long since died and his only son had been killed in a recent accident. He had no heir, so he had to decide to whom to leave his kingdom, who would he pass on the wisdom of his long life and all his worldly wealth.

He decided to look for a suitable heir among his people, and although it was against all precedent, he was a very good-willed king and decided he'd invite all interested people from the lands to his castle to see who was to be the next heir. He looked forward to the day with happy anticipation.

In the early morning hours of New Year's Day, which was the day he chose, people started flooding in. They arrived from near and far - women, men, rich, poor, young, old, learned, illiterate - and all were warmly welcomed by the palace staff and invited to the royal bathhouse to rest, relax, and clean up in preparation for meeting the king.

They were invited to soak in perfumed baths and offered fragrant lotions and oils to smooth their skin. Masseuses came to ease stress and tension, hairdressers to provide new hairstyles and trim beards. Now groomed and washed, they went into a huge wardrobe room where each selected a new outfit in which to meet the king. In his great kindness, he wanted everyone to have an equal chance in terms of how they appeared.

Relaxed and happy after the luxuriant bath, the applicants were beside themselves with excitement when they saw the dazzling array of fashionable clothing offered to them. Each tried on many different outfits, like children trying on make-believe costumes, preening before mirrors and each other, asking and giving advice, especially with accessories and shoes. When each finally settled on the outfit of their choice, they were taken into the palace banquet room where a lavish feast awaited them—a smorgasbord with every food and delicacy imaginable. Everyone wanted to taste every dish, so there was much bustling back and forth. No one wanted to miss out on anything.

While feasting with gusto, they were serenaded by musicians. During dessert, there were games of chance and a tantalizing array of prizes. This was followed by a mesmerizing magic show featuring the king's finest wizards.

It was at this point, after bathing, dressing, feasting, and being entertained, that the applicants were to begin going upstairs, one by one, to the king's chambers for their interview with his majesty. But the magic show was so spellbinding that not one of them could pull themselves away. They remained glued to

their seats, completely entranced.

Meanwhile, the king was upstairs happily anticipating the appearance of the applicants. The appointed time came and he heard no footsteps on the stairs. Still, he waited patiently. No one appeared. Finally, as the sun moved close to the horizon, the king summoned his chief minister. "Where are the applicants? I'm eager to find my heir."

The minister looked sheepishly down at his shoes, visibly distressed. Clearing his throat, he spoke haltingly: "I am sorry to have to tell you this, your majesty, but they've all gone home. They've taken their new clothes. They've stuffed their pockets with leftovers from the feast. They've taken the prizes. They even took the soaps and lotions from the bathhouse. They've all gone home."

The king's hopes were dashed. He had no heir. Turning, he gazed silently out the window at the rolling hills and valleys of his beloved kingdom. His eyes filled with tears.

Satiated with food and drink, excited by new clothes and amusing prizes, mesmerized by music and magic, the people had completely forgotten why they came to the king's palace in the first place.

This is really the story of us all. There's not one of us that does not get waylaid. We know that. Sometimes we stay on track, but so often we get carried off into the preoccupations that really hold sway over us. We all get carried off. We get involved with planning and controlling and defending and trying to get through the day and make this happen and that happen, and we do disconnect from what most matters to us. And then we remember with a bit of sadness or angst that we missed many moments.

As we mature and wake up more and more, as we practice remembering on the path, what we're remembering really is what matters. We're remembering how much preciousness there is to a moment of real presence, to connecting in a heartfelt way with someone else, to really being here to live this life. We remember more. And this is the main attribute of the spiritual warrior—this quality of remembering what matters, coming back home again and again, remembering more and more moments.

In Jungian archetypes, the king-queen represents the awareness of it all, the mindfulness, the holding of the realm, containing and holding the realm in heart and mind and awareness. I love this description written by Jack Kornfield: "To take the one seat, to become the king or queen, to reclaim our Buddha nature, is to sit in the midst of experience just as it is, and to have our eyes open and our heart open."

In any moment we do this, it opens a whole new possibility—the possibility that we bear witness to, that we experience the unspeakable sorrow and beauty that makes up life.

This is a description of our awakened awareness, the king-queen quality. The spiritual warrior is in service of this. This is who and what the allegiance is towards of our basic energy.

Now, there are several qualities of awareness that are cultivated to allow the spiritual warrior—this part of our being—to really align ourselves, to remember, to be here for our lives. And they're described

beautifully by Herman Hesse in the book Siddhartha. Many of you have probably read it, so to remind you: at one point he writes, "Siddhartha had three powers. He could think, he could wait, and he could fast."

These three qualities are really the grounds of a meditative mind. So let's look at them one by one.

He says he could think—he could see clearly. See clearly, be here for what is. To live with a totality of attention. So there's an awareness of posture. There's an awareness of sound. There's an awareness of mood, there's awareness of what is going on in this world. To see clearly means we're aware of our habits, of where we get stuck. To see clearly means we're aware of our potential, our capacity to really live in an open-hearted way, to be wise. So this is one of the qualities of a meditative mind and of the spiritual warrior—this clarity of seeing, this awareness, this attention that's right here and now, awake and alert.

The second quality: Siddhartha could wait. Now waiting, what does that mean? To be able to pause. The power of not-doing. That takes the quality of wakefulness where we're not carried off in our reflex and reactivity, but rather letting go of that and just being patient, silent, non-reactive. Discovering in that place, in that space of silence and quietness, the wisdom and compassion that can really guide us. That's where it comes from—learning to pause. It's a real power, and it's one that takes training, as you know. We tend to lean forward into our life and just roll along. To stop, to pause, to wait.

So Siddhartha could think. Siddhartha could wait. The third: he could fast. Now this is the one that gets most misunderstood, so I'll take a little time with it. Fasting—and it's also described in the classical texts as renunciation—means letting go of what binds us, renouncing or letting go of what keeps us small. Letting go of our habits of overwork, our habits of passivity, of overeating, of exploiting others, of controlling, of judging. Whatever it is that we're doing that gets in the way of full open presence, we gradually, as we can, let go of.

When we begin to realize our capacity for full presence, it becomes clearer and clearer how our habits of holding on or resisting keep us distant from ourselves, from each other. We start seeing the limiting beliefs we have about ourselves: "I can't do this," "I'm not good enough"—the steep self-doubts. That's part of renunciation: to not be so invested in, to let go of these ideas we have that keep us small.

Chögyam Trungpa writes, "What the warrior renounces is anything in her experience that is a barrier between herself and others." What do we do to push off others, to keep others out of our heart? What we're letting go of is contraction, is the small identities that stop us from realizing our Buddha nature. And in the letting go, we're freed up to live in the creative current of life.

So actually, renunciation is the pathway to a real creative, active participation. Because we have let go of all the constraints. Fasting is a way of saying, giving up all that takes us away from life—non-clinging. The attitude, it's the willingness to be here. This is the attitude of the spiritual warrior, this real willingness to say yes, yes to this life, to become part of the stream of life.

Now, meditation practice is really training in these three qualities: in seeing clearly, in pausing, in this kind of letting go into the flow. As an example, the one we're most familiar with here in our practice is frequently that thoughts come up. And what happens? The first part: to begin to see clearly that it's happening, just to recognize, "Okay, thinking." In the moment of seeing clearly, we're not so identified.

And then what? We pause. We just rest in that space of awareness. Just let be. Get quiet for a moment. See what's there. There's then the third: this letting go back into the flow, letting go of the grip of the thought, back into the flow of the breath. Our sounds that come and go are if there's a strong mood that wants our attention. We come back to what is.

By letting go of this identification with the waves of thought over and over again, we begin to see that we've been living in wave ideas and we haven't been connected to this ocean, this boundlessness of being which is our nature. So we really are practicing letting go into the totality. As we practice this letting go, we have available the full expression of life energy. It's access to a real boundless kind of creativity and loving. So that's the resolve of the warrior, to keep seeing what's happening and loosening the grip and opening back into the flow.

Now what stops us from doing that? What stops us from this letting go into it all? What most people find when they begin to investigate, when they look closely, is that our tendency to keep holding tight, to keep leaving, to getting lost in the past and the future, is very driven by fear. There's a real fear of opening to the mysterious and enormous energies of life just as they are. We want to in some way control it, hold it at bay.

There's a fear to let go into life, to really just sit down in our bodies. I mean, just try it. Just really letting go and sit down in it all. And we begin to, but then we recontract very quickly. Unconsciously, there's a continuous effort to kind of keep our fingers on the knob and the dial to control pain and pleasure. Fear is what stops and freezes this energy towards awakening. It's said that in order to be with life, we have to be willing to face this fear. That the source of courage of the spiritual warrior is this willingness to open to fear. Are we willing?

So our practice starts with seeing where we are meeting our edge. And we each have those places in our life where we've gotten very habitual to avoid something. Places where we don't let ourselves really get close to other people, where we get very defended or armored, places where we are not willing to take a risk creatively or in work. We're not willing to show vulnerability. We're not able to really face the parts of ourselves or other people that frighten us. We all have those edges, every one of us.

And this willingness to face fear is really a willingness to stay there and to see what happens. Again, Chogyam Trungpa, who writes a lot about the spiritual warrior archetype: "Acknowledging fear is not a cause for depression or discouragement. Because we possess such fear, we also are potentially entitled to experience fearlessness. True fearlessness is not the reduction of fear, but facing, going through, and beyond."

Now, going beyond fear again, does not mean that the sensations of fear just disappear. Rather, going beyond fear means that we have shifted from feeling the victim of, the one who is afraid, the one who is a small, endangered self. We've shifted from that into the awareness that recognizes fear with compassion, with presence. Do you understand that shift? The fear can still be there, but our sense of who we are has expanded. There's room.

This happens more and more as we are willing to be with what we've habitually avoided, resisted. Gradually we soften, we open, we shift in our sense of who we are. But it takes a willingness.

So the question is, what makes us willing to face what's difficult? What makes us willing to be with pain, to open to shame, to touch into the ocean of grief, to be with other people's grief? What makes us willing?

"Our desire to awaken," one student responds. Beautiful. "Wanting a higher and better quality of life," offers another. "Compassion," says a third voice. Yes, compassion.

Compassion emerges as another gateway to willingness—having compassion for ourselves and others makes us willing to face what we might otherwise avoid. Someone noted that fighting against our experience simply doesn't work; resistance only creates more suffering. The desire for freedom itself becomes a powerful motivator, as does simple curiosity—that natural interest in exploring what lies beneath the surface of our habitual patterns.

Each of us finds our own flavor of what makes us willing to practice. We're all on this path in our unique way, yet something is making us willing to face what our conditioning would normally have us turn away from. To practice mindfulness is to be willing to meet life in a more unconditional way, and there's enormous power in this willingness.

This willingness generally expresses itself in two fundamental ways. The first is care—we care about life itself, about waking up, about being real and honest with what is. We love life so deeply that we want to experience it fully, even in its painful moments. The second quality is interest, born from our love of truth. Part of our love for life is this insatiable desire to know, to understand what this mysterious existence is really about.

There's no way to truly understand, no way to really know what this is all about, no way to live fully or open our hearts completely except by facing each moment as it is. And so, gradually, we learn to put down our armor.

It's profoundly ironic that the spiritual warrior—this archetype we find so compelling—actually refers to one who has the courage to disarm, to become vulnerable. We see this pattern repeated throughout history in all the great stories of heroes and heroic acts. This willingness emerges from deep caring, from love for something or someone greater than our small concerns.

Consider the myth of Camelot, where knights undertook extraordinary quests inspired by love for the lady

of the court. Think of mothers performing superhuman feats to protect their children, or the countless beings throughout history who have fought for freedom in various forms. What enables these transcendent acts? We move beyond our usual preoccupations with personal pain and pleasure because of this great love—for life, for truth, for something that matters deeply.

Take a moment to reflect on where this quality shows up in your own life. What are you truly dedicated to? Who are the people, what are the activities or causes that evoke your deepest commitment? Where have you felt that sense of the spiritual warrior's resolve—that willingness to put everything on the line for what you care about?

For some, this dedication flows toward the path of awakening, toward the Dharma itself. For others, it's devotion to a relationship, to parenting, to creative expression, to service in the world. Where have you experienced this quality of resolve? How has this kind of dedication energized you, allowed you to let go of smaller concerns and open to something larger?

It's valuable to recognize and affirm this beautiful part of ourselves. By sensing again and again what we truly care about, we activate and energize ourselves on the path. This caring isn't something we need to manufacture—it's already present, waiting to be acknowledged and honored.

Sometimes, as was mentioned, it's the great life events that crack us open—the traumas and dramas, the births and deaths that awaken our heart and deepen our resolve. Learning that someone has cancer, losing a job, the birth of a child, spiritual breakthroughs or sudden insights—these experiences can instantly awaken the caring that's already within us. They don't create something new; they simply remove the veil that was covering what was always there.

We get shocked into being more here.

I'd like to share a personal experience from the last few days that speaks directly to this. About three days ago, a friend of mine committed suicide. I'm very close with his wife and family. His son is one of my son's best friends. This has created ripples of suffering touching many lives.

Yet witnessing how people have responded, how they've risen to the occasion—probably everyone here has lost someone close or knows someone who has—reveals such depths of compassion. It's as if when people are finally compelled to feel grief fully, so much falls away. There emerges this profound potential to be utterly real, to give freely, to sacrifice willingly. And this truly arouses resolve.

For me, it's inevitable that seeing a precious life end, facing death directly, makes me more resolved to love well and to live my moments fully. This speaks to one of the great universal teachings found in almost every tradition: that death and impermanence can be our teacher, moment by moment, because everything is going, everything is dying. Today is almost gone, our bodies are aging, for many of us our children are growing up, the seasons are changing—it's all moving so very fast.

Our response can either be to put on blinders or to look directly into the face of this impermanence, this dying happening all around us, and really cherish our moments. To truly value this one and this one.

The shaman Don Juan writes: "Without the awareness of death, he would be an ordinary man involved in ordinary acts. He would lack the necessary potency, the necessary concentration that transforms one's ordinary time on earth into magical power."

This is the heart of the spiritual warrior—this cherishing of life and having the courage and resolve to really show up for it, to be here for it.

In the most mature awakened bodhisattva, the spiritual warrior, this loving becomes unconditional. This resolve becomes comprehensive. All situations, all circumstances serve to awaken—the driving back and forth to places, the petty tasks, the big obstacles, the people who annoy us. Everything serves awakening. Every being is included in our hearts.

I mentioned earlier that this will to live, this quality of intentionality, often gets wrapped around our fears and wanting, which is quite natural. This has been called the shadow warrior. It's really the same energy as the mature spiritual warrior—still that will to live, to thrive—but it becomes contracted around wanting and fearing.

What do we do with this? This shadow warrior has been the cause of wars throughout history, of violence. It's the cause of destruction and sickness, of disease inflicted upon the earth and environment. How can we work with this energy in a way that transforms it, so we can manifest as mature warriors?

To awaken and heal, we start right where we are. If we find ourselves in the grip of the shadow warrior—of anger, of wanting to hurt or destroy or accumulate—if our energy, our intentionality is locked in contraction, we start there. Our practice, as always, is to bring the same clear seeing to what is arising.

Anger. See it clearly. Pause. Have commitment enough to simply pause and let it be, and let go.

Letting go of anger doesn't mean pushing it away. It means seeing the stories we've wrapped around it and allowing the energy to be there without identifying ourselves as "the angry person." We are the awareness that includes it.

The more moments we bring these qualities of clear seeing, of pausing, of opening, the more moments we touch our true nature, our free nature. The shadow warrior transforms into the mature warrior through kind attention, through opening to the vulnerability that drives him or her, to the soft spot, to being tender with that soft spot—the fear, the wanting.

This is the training we're engaged in. We train in concentration, in mindfulness, so we develop that muscle, that capacity, that strength. Then when we get caught, we can notice it. There's no shame, no judgment—just "Okay, caught, caught in this energy"—and see it clearly.

I began tonight with the story of those people who went to the castle and forgot why they were there. It is our nature to forget. Each of us, every day, gets pulled off track. This always happens. We forget. It's also natural that as we practice mindfulness, we remember more and more.

As this basic quality of the spiritual warrior begins to flower, we find ourselves present and knowing what we love, living what we love, living our moments fully.

The Buddha, toward the end of his life, taught that fear and insecurity are great—these are the energies that drive the shadow warrior. Fear and insecurity are great, but greater yet is the truth of our connection. Greater yet is the power of love. This is our Buddha nature: each of us has this power of awareness and love that can transform and awaken our hearts.

When we get little glimmers—through sitting, we get glimmers in nature, with loved ones, we get glimmers through our losses—these moments can serve to deepen our commitment, our resolve, because we realize how much we cherish this life. Like the bodhisattvas of the ages, we remember that we're really here for only one purpose: to wake up, to live it fully, and to love fully.

I'd like to close with a short poem:

To be of the earth is to know the restlessness of being a seed, the darkness of being planted, the struggle toward the light, the pain of growth into the light, the joy of bursting and bearing fruit, the love of being food for someone, the scattering of your seeds, the decay of the seasons, the mystery of death, and the miracle of birth.

Let's take a few moments to sit in guided meditation. As a way of establishing presence, connect with the aspiration of your heart, what brings you here, what you most wish to guide your life. Let that be your prayer for yourself in this moment: "May I awaken, may these moments be wakeful." Whatever words, whatever flavor matches for you.

Now take a few moments to relax your body, your heart, your mind. Make room for whatever arises in awareness. Meet whatever arises with interest, with care. See clearly what's true. Pause. Let go into the stream of experience again and again.

As a way of anchoring, if your mind is busy, simply steady yourself with the breath, with sound. Then open to whatever calls your attention with this clear seeing.

Let's close with metta meditation. Sit comfortably, taking a few moments to feel your heart, feel the breath at your heart.

I'd like to ask that we bring our prayer and care to the family I described earlier. Hold in your hearts, in the space of heart, the sense of these beings who are going through so much loss and pain. Alden, Hedda, Jane, Will. May these beings and all their relations be held in the great compassionate heart of wisdom. May they be soothed. May they discover some peace, some understanding, some freedom.

Now take some moments in silence to bring into your heart whoever in your life needs some healing, needs some kindness. Sense their vulnerability. Sense where they're tender, and offer your care.

Finally, let us open our prayer to include all beings. May all beings be held in this great space of compassion. May all beings touch peace. May all beings awaken and be free.

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