Death and the Three Characteristics

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 48:59

As a staff, we just completed a Passover dinner a little early since the sun is just setting. And this is also Good Friday. So I'd like to wish all of you a happy Passover and happy Good Friday. These are holidays that celebrate freedom and the oncoming of resurrection. It seems very fitting that we're here together coming to greater freedom.

I think most of you know that I joined the retreat a little late because of a death in my family. A week ago today my older sister named Judy died. She was someone who was really special to me and to many people. She had a really big heart, a big laugh, and was someone who has always been kind to me and who has enriched my life forever. I'd like to dedicate this talk tonight to her memory.

Jack talked last night about the mystery that we all swim in—the mystery of our existence. Death is such a part of that mystery. It is such a mystery in itself. It shocks me every time that someone close to me dies. How can that person have been here and now not be here? Where did they go? As my other sister said when we were at Judy's house, it just doesn't register. It's so hard to comprehend.

Who dies? Or what dies? What happens after death? What's this separation of the spirit and the body? How can it be that I will die? And what will that be like? There's a huge mystery and because of the mystery there's a sense of fear of the unknown. And so our lives as humans are connected with a fear of dying.

It was interesting—there was a survey that was taken some years ago about what people are afraid of in this country. Fear of death came in at number four. I thought that was pretty interesting. Number one was fear of public speaking. I don't know about you all, but personally I'd rather be here tonight.

Maybe to some extent we're not prepared for death because we're not fully prepared for life, because we don't fully understand what it means to be alive. I'd like to suggest tonight that death is a mystery that takes place on several layers. At the core of life and death are mysteries that we will never solve, that we will never understand. There is a mystery intrinsic to existence. I mean, why is there something and not nothing? It's baffling.

But I feel that one or two of the outer layers of this mystery that death represents for us can be better understood than they currently are in our culture. Our culture has not given us the deepest wisdom to understand the issues of birth and death. Over my time of practice, death is still very much a mystery to me, but a little less so than it was in the beginning. My fear of death is still present, but a bit less so than it was at the beginning. At times, in my life and in my practice, death seems to me sometimes just like

changing the channels, just switching to a different frequency.

In this evening's talk, I'd like to talk about unwrapping a little bit of these outer layers of mystery around birth and death. I'd like to talk about it in terms of three aspects that the Buddha talked about as very central to his teaching and to an understanding of life. He called these the three characteristics of existence. He described that all existence, all human existence is colored by three facts. I think of these as the facts of life for grown-ups. They are impermanence, suffering, and no-self, or selflessness. This last is a concept that causes the most confusion when we tend to present it in retreat, so I'll leave that for the last. But I want to talk about all three of these aspects tonight. They're often known by the Pali terms that the Buddha talked about them in: anicca, dukkha, and anatta.

The first of the three is impermanence. Just to give you a sense of the Buddha's own importance that he attached to the concept of impermanence, he said this: "Foremost among footprints is the elephant's." Isn't that a nice line? You can tell he lived in a little different time than ours. "Foremost among reflections is that on impermanence." Foremost among reflections.

The implication is that if there's anything you want to hold in your mind and turn toward from time to time to reflect on and grow in wisdom from, it is the reflection on impermanence, of change.

In retreat, this becomes one of the most remarkable features of our experience, as several people have already commented. Everything changes, and nothing lasts very long. We're crippled by pain in our back as we sit on the cushion. We stand up, and it goes away. We have a sitting of incredible dullness and drowsiness, and the next period there's great clarity. Then we rush back into the meditation hall only to find great agitation, then more clarity, then anger, and so forth.

I hope you don't think this is going to stop at some point during the week and you're going to land in mindful clarity for the rest of the retreat. I hate to disappoint you, but it's probably not going to happen. I asked someone today how their retreat was and he just looked at me for a minute and said, "That's a really hard question to answer. How do you single something out from this changing experience to highlight? There's really nothing to highlight."

Just to prepare you for your re-entry into the world, a lot of people are going to ask you how your retreat was. You're going to have the same problem that fellow had today. So I have one recommendation—an insider tip for you. All most people want to hear is you say, "It was great." They'll go away happy, and you don't have to think about it very hard. We usually save that tip for integration day, but I'm giving you advance warning.

In this way, our retreat is a microcosm of our life. We look over our entire world, the entire field of our experience. What lasts? What have you found in your life that lasts?

We are so vulnerable as human beings because of this fact of death. Everything that lives is vulnerable to death in any moment. Out of that vulnerability, we all come to life with a great longing for security, for

safety, for finding a place of rest and comfort. When we grow up as children, we tend to look for that very much in our parents. To some extent, as children, parents are necessary to satisfy that. Yet that relationship is probably not totally satisfactory for most of us. Certainly by the time we become teenagers, most of us are glad to make the move away from that relationship to more independence.

Often it seems we try to recreate that relationship through our intimate relationships or marriage, looking for another form of security. Sometimes we have to learn about this tendency the hard way.

I came to a meditation retreat a number of years ago—a two-month intensive retreat. As I entered the retreat, my partner at the time stayed behind because she was getting involved in a different spiritual practice, a different spiritual scene. I thought as I left and came into the retreat, "Gosh, I really feel good about this relationship. This relationship is really the bedrock of my life in the world." Bad thought. I should have known when I said that to myself that meant trouble.

So nature set out to prove me otherwise. I came out of my two-month retreat feeling very open and very vulnerable. I'd practiced really intensively—worked hard to get my sleep down to four hours a night and about eighteen hours a day of just sitting and walking, with very little time for meals and personal hygiene. A very effortful retreat.

After two months, I came out and called my partner, only to find that she had become very involved during my time away with a guru. The other spiritual scene she was involved with centered around this guru. It was a relationship in which, if I were to be catty—which I don't mind being in this situation—I would say there was room in his concept of relationship for only one love, and that was with him.

I felt the connection with my partner really fading as I understood the nature of the relationship she was becoming involved in with this other teacher. When I began to understand it, I felt like the bottom dropped out of my world. That bedrock I had been taking for granted dissolved into what it had always been—spaciousness. It was very upsetting to me. I went through a month or so of incredible turmoil and fear because of the security I had invested in this relationship and adjusting to this possible change.

As it turned out, when I came back home and we had a chance to reconnect, she rethought her relationship to her guru and eventually left him. I've observed that scene over the years, and every single relationship that has come into that scene has broken up.

So I felt that my perceptions were accurate and it was not just a case of fantasy on my part.

We look for security in so many places. We look to parents, we look to intimate relationships, we look to all the objects that the world provides—money and possessions. You've probably seen those bumper stickers or license plate holders that say, "He who dies with the most toys wins." Maybe it's a Bay Area thing, but I see those a lot. We seek security through career, through some kind of status or title or power. But in today's economic times, these things are very tenuous—money and career and status. They can go away overnight.

We invest in memories or our anticipations for the future. We look for a lot of security in this body. It seems to be a constant through our life. It's always with us. We look for health, we look for a certainty there. And this too is subject to change. Certainly at this time in my life, I'm very aware of the process of aging.

This came to me actually about ten years ago. I considered myself to be a fairly young man at the time. I was at a talk with my wife, and at the end of the talk, she and I were chatting at the back of the hall. I went away to talk to someone else, and someone who was sitting beside her turned and said, "Who was that man?"

She said, "What man?"

And he said, "That middle-aged man you were talking to."

And I was shocked. I had a few of these gray hairs back then, but I considered myself really very young. I sort of added up the years and thought, "Oh, I could be halfway there." Okay, middle age was upon me, so I started to deal with my own aging.

I have a friend who started to go quite bald in his early twenties, and he said for him the hardest thing about it was when he washed his face, because when he got to his forehead, he didn't know where to stop.

So there's aging. And in our relationship with the body, of course, finally there's death. The end of aging is death. And that marks the separation from all that we've come to know or depend on.

We look to many things in this world for refuge and for security, but every single one of them is subject to the law of impermanence, is subject to change. It's just a matter of time.

The Tibetans have a formulation of this, and they say that impermanence has four ends: The end of birth is death. The end of gathering is separation. The end of accumulation is dispersal. And the end of building is destruction.

So in every aspect of our existence as a human being, we're confronted by change. We're confronted by beginnings and by endings.

Some of us catch on to this fact and we come to meditation practice. And perhaps in coming to meditation practice, we may be looking again for some ultimate security, for some lasting mental state or place of rest. So we come to a retreat like this. And what do we find? More impermanence.

The breath comes and goes. Sounds arise and vanish. Body sensations arise and glimmer and pass away. Feelings succeed one another like the wind. Thoughts come and go in a torrent. And as we become more in touch with our body, even what we thought was solid sometimes can seem to be dissolving, as some of you have reported in interviews. So we find it difficult through our meditation practice to find anything here that lasts also.

The Buddha advised his nuns and monks to live very simply and to practice in the middle of nature. This was one of the constants of his advice. He advised them to live in, as the old texts say, remote forests and jungle thickets. So if you can find any of those, highly recommended. To live at the foot of a tree or in a cave.

One of the beautiful things about practicing in nature is that nature is always showing impermanence.

That's one of the great gifts of this facility and the closeness of the desert. The wind is always changing. The light is shifting. The clouds come and go. Animals appear for a moment and then disappear back into their holes or trees. We glimpse an owl or a tortoise or a snake just briefly, and then it vanishes. Other creatures die and leave their bones to become food for others. Living close to nature, we begin to really feel this impermanence right to our bones. It becomes part of us because we realize that we are part of nature.

Nature is not a place we go and visit on holiday or a backpacking trip. We discover that nature is within as well as without, and all of nature is characterized by impermanence. Even ideal situations change.

One of the beauties of practicing in Asia is that one has the opportunity to live still very close to nature for an extended period of time. For that reason, I went to Thailand and ordained as a monk and spent a year practicing mostly in two different forest monasteries. The first one I practiced in was in the north of Thailand near Chiang Mai, and I had what seemed like the perfect situation—really one of the best practice situations I've been in.

Because I was a Westerner, I was given the best hut in the monastery. It was across a stream and then up a path that dead-ended. The stream was at the base of this beautiful canyon, and the river ran through the bottom. From my hut, I couldn't see another person or another hut. And the teacher there didn't speak English, so I was really left on my own just to do my own practice of sitting and walking, which I did day after day for several months. I thought, this is really the perfect spot.

But I had made a commitment to spend another period of practice time at a monastery in the south of Thailand, so I knew that I had to leave this place soon. As time came to leave, I became very clingy. I didn't want to go. This is just perfect, I thought.

Then the rains came. And when the rains came, the river right outside my hut started to pick up volume. The roar of water began to sound day and night. That was okay for a while, but then the river started to sing a song. And the song it started to sing was Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues." From an album I had bought seventeen years before, I was able to recall every single line of the song. At that point I became glad to be moving to another monastery.

All of our experience in any dimension we look at is just rising and passing. This is one of the reasons we invite you to look at your experience with some precision and in some detail—to convince yourself that there's nothing in the whole field of your body and your mind that's static, that's not subject to this law of

change.

When I went to the other monastery in the south, that monastery was called Wat Suan Mok, and the abbot was Ajahn Buddhadasa, who is one of the probably greatest Thai meditation masters of the second half of this century. He passed away last year, unfortunately. But while we were there, the Westerners had the chance to meet with him once a week. He spoke quite good English and would give us teachings directly in English. There was a group of just about seven of us Westerners there, so we had quite a lot of intimate contact with him.

His recommendation, his meditation instructions for us in that period were like this. He said, "Okay, consider one of the senses. Consider the sense of sight. For the sense of sight to arise, there have to be three components. There has to be a visual form, something to see—a person, a thing, an animal. There has to be a functioning sight organ, or the eye. And then visual consciousness arises as the impact of those two."

So in any moment of seeing, there is the visible shape, the sense organ of sight or the eye, and visual consciousness. These three things in relationship to sight are called the sense bases of seeing, or in Pali, the ayatanas. That's the sense of sight. The same schema gets replicated for the other five senses—the four senses of the body and the sixth sense of the mind. So we have the senses of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling. And then in Buddhism, the mind is considered a sixth sense, the cognition of all the mental states—the emotions, the images, perceptions, intention, and so forth.

So the approach he advocated was to not grasp either end of the snake, but to see the whole snake. To acknowledge that both pleasure and pain exist, that they're both equally transitory, and to relate to them in a way that doesn't involve clinging to one or pushing the other away.

This teaching points to a fundamental misunderstanding we have about the nature of happiness. We often think that happiness comes from getting what we want and avoiding what we don't want. But the Buddha's teaching suggests that this very approach—this constant reaching and rejecting—is what creates our suffering.

Think about it: when we're grasping after pleasant experiences, we're already in a state of dissatisfaction. The very act of reaching implies that we don't have what we need right now. And when we're pushing away unpleasant experiences, we're in a state of resistance, which is itself a form of suffering.

The Buddha described this pattern as tanha, often translated as craving or thirst. It's this deep-seated tendency to always want things to be different from how they are. We want pleasure to last longer, pain to end sooner, and neutral experiences to become more interesting. But this constant wanting keeps us in a state of agitation, never quite satisfied with what's actually happening.

In meditation, we can observe this pattern very clearly. We sit down with great intentions, hoping for a peaceful, concentrated experience. But maybe our mind is restless, or our body is uncomfortable, or we're

feeling sleepy. If we're trying to grasp onto some ideal meditation experience, we immediately create suffering for ourselves.

Or perhaps we do have one of those wonderful sittings—clear, spacious, filled with ease. If we try to hold onto that experience, to make it happen again next time we sit, we've already lost it. We've turned a moment of natural peace into an object of desire.

This is why the practice isn't about having particular kinds of experiences. It's about learning to relate differently to whatever experiences we're having. Instead of immediately evaluating them as good or bad, desirable or undesirable, we can learn to meet them with a quality of open awareness that doesn't immediately reach for or push away.

The Pali term for suffering is dukkha. It's usually translated as suffering, but it had a broader range of meaning in that time. It meant not just direct suffering, but the unsatisfactory nature of phenomena, the unreliable nature of phenomena, because none of them can provide what we're really looking for, which is a lasting peace and a lasting happiness.

Suzuki Roshi, a Zen master, put it this way: "Without accepting the fact that everything changes, we cannot find perfect composure. But unfortunately, although it is true, it is difficult for us to accept it. Because we cannot accept the truth of transiency, we suffer. So the cause of suffering is our non-acceptance of this truth. The teaching of the cause of suffering and the teaching that everything changes are two sides of one coin."

So until we learn to let go completely, until we are really completely free of clinging, suffering is an inevitable part of life. It's just one of our realities.

As we meditate, we open more and more to the wholesome states of mind—to mindfulness and concentration, to compassion and joy and metta. But in that opening, we also open more and more deeply to suffering, to the pain of life.

This is a quote from an Indian teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj. He worked in dialogue with people, and this is a dialogue that he had with a Westerner.

Maharaj said, "The essence of pleasure is acceptance. Whatever may be the situation, if it is acceptable, it is pleasant. If it is not acceptable, it is painful."

The questioner said, "Pain is not acceptable."

And Maharaj said, "Why not? Did you ever try? Do try, and you will find in pain a joy which pleasure cannot yield, for the simple reason that acceptance of pain takes you much deeper than pleasure does. The personal self, by its very nature, is constantly pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. The ending of this pattern enables you to return to your real nature, the source of all happiness and peace."

The Buddha talked about this fact of change and suffering as an inspiration for his practice when he was still seeking, when he was still the Bodhisattva. He put it this way: "Suppose that I, who am subject to decay and death, were to seek my happiness in that which is also subject to decay and death. Would that be for my benefit and welfare?" His answer was no.

He said, "But suppose that I, who am subject to decay and death, were to seek my happiness in that which is beyond death, in the deathless. Would that be for my benefit and welfare?" And he said yes. And that really became the thrust of his practice—to discover that which is beyond death, that which is the deathless.

The third of the characteristics of existence that the Buddha talked about is what he called anatta, which we translate as no-self or selflessness. This is a little bit nuanced, so I'm not going to go into it so deeply, but I'll just say that it's a root question of our meditation: the question of who am I or what am I? What is this thing I call myself?

Most of our thoughts and feelings and actions revolve around this central concept of I. But do we really know what it is? Let me ask a couple of questions. I want to take a look at how we use the language around I and ask you some questions that shouldn't be too difficult.

How tall are you? And what color are your eyes? Everybody get those? Good.

Now, when I ask, "How tall are you?" I would answer, "I'm 5'10"." What does that really mean, "I'm 5'10""? Are my thoughts 5'10"? Is my happiness 5'10"? I'm really saying when I answer that, the body is 5'10", and I am the body, right? So here we're identifying I as body.

Okay, I'm the body. If that's true, suppose you cut your hair and it falls on the floor. Is that you lying on the floor? Hmm.

What about the other question? What color are your eyes? I'd say my eyes are brown. This is a little different.

Now I am someone who has eyes. I have brown eyes. Hmm, they're my eyes. Well, now I seems to be someone who stands apart from the body and owns it. I'm the owner of the body.

We do the same thing with feelings. I could ask you, "How are you?" and you'd say, "I'm happy," or "I'm sad." So are you your mind? Or I could say, "What are your feelings in this moment?" You can say, "Well, I'm dealing with my feelings of happiness or fear or whatever." So are you something separate that owns those feelings?

This is interesting. Sometimes we feel ourselves to be mostly an observer. We're sort of located in this space in the center of our head behind the eyes, and we kind of collect information through these two sense organs that work like a periscope—you know, that stick out and gather information and send the data back to the real self. Who's the observer? So is that what you are? Are you the observer that's in the

middle of your head? But have you ever looked there to try to find you there?

It's all very curious. And the more we look, the less we find. So what it points to is that although we think we know what this "I" is, when we look for it, nothing there. Nothing there.

And the Buddha said that this sense of "I" is just a fleeting sense. It's just something that arises in the moment. But there is no solid entity called "I." There is no one to whom all this is happening. There is no owner of this body and mind and of this consciousness.

Similarly, all the things we experience that we call "mine"—there's no owner, so they're not really mine. We experience a pain and we think, "my knee." We experience a thought and we think, "my thought." Misleading. When we see clearly, we just see pain. We see anger. We hear sound. We see sight. We see thought. The "my" is extra. The "I" is extra.

So what's the true nature of the world? What are things really like? The Buddha talked about the truth of impermanence, suffering, and non-self. He put it in those ways because we tend to see in terms of permanence, happiness, and self. He's trying to correct a misperception—our misperception of the world.

When we begin to see in terms of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and no-self, we start to see things more as they are. In doing that, there's a degree of freedom that comes. But it's not the final freedom. It's not the last or greatest freedom possible.

These three characteristics are really just doorways for seeing more deeply what our true nature is, how we're really put together. They encourage us to let go, not to hold so tight. And as we let go, we can inquire into that experience.

So in this very moment, in any moment, what is your experience when nothing is being taken hold of? When there's no clinging to body sensations or sounds, to sights, to thoughts, to feelings, to breath. When there's no clinging anywhere as "I" or "mine"—what is your experience? What is left when clinging goes?

We start to see that as the objects come and go in our field of experience, what remains constant is our capacity for awareness.

Over the course of these days, you've had so many different experiences. If you look at the thread that links them all together, don't you find that there's a thread of awareness through all of them?

Suzuki Roshi talked about this capacity for awareness as what he called big mind—this vast and limitless space of awareness in which all the objects of the world are arising and passing. It's empty, like space is, but it also has the capacity to cognize, to recognize.

This was brought home to me in a really direct way. One of the interesting things about being a monk is that you're allowed to observe autopsies. Traditionally, in the Buddha's time, the meditation was on funeral grounds, charnel grounds, where bodies were left to decompose and decay. Part of the training of

a monk or a nun was considered to be to sit with those bodies and observe their decomposition. Today, monks are encouraged to observe autopsies.

When I was spending time in Bangkok, I had the chance to do this at one of the hospitals in the center of the city. It was extraordinary—it had a very profound impact on my understanding. I walked out of about an hour and a half of watching two or three different autopsies, which I had never seen before. I had never even seen a dead body up close.

I walked out into the street, and as I was waiting for the bus, I was watching the people pass by on the sidewalk by this big parade ground in Bangkok. And I saw them entirely differently. I didn't see any solid personality there. I saw walking corpses—corpses that were animated just with this spark of awareness, this spark of spirit.

When I thought about it afterwards and tried to understand what I had seen, what I felt I had seen was what we really are: this sensing organism with memory. When we come fully into the present moment, we are just alive to each moment of sense impression.

Seen in this way, we start to see that that spirit—whatever we want to call it—that brightness, that luminosity that shines through each other's eyes, that luminosity in us, holds the entire world. And in that luminosity that holds everything, we recognize a new relationship to life. We recognize that we are interconnected with everything that is. Thich Nhat Hanh's word for this is interbeing. That world is our reality. We are that world. Just as I am your reality now as I speak, you are my reality as I speak to you.

In this, the division between what we consider to be self and what we consider to be other starts to break down. There's an image from the Huayan school of Buddhism, a Chinese school, called the Jewel Net of Indra. The image is that the universe is a vast net connected by strands throughout the entire universe. At each intersection of two strands, there's a gem. Each gem is different—some are diamonds, some are emeralds, some are rubies, some are big, some are small. But each gem has the capacity of reflecting all the other gems on the net. Each gem reflects the totality of the universe.

This is a description of our situation. Each of us holds the cosmos. And in that holding, we are the cosmos. We are the entire universe, each one of us.

That sort of interpenetration wouldn't be possible if there was anything solid in us. It would put up a barrier, put up an opacity. We can interpenetrate because we're not solid.

The Diamond Sutra put it this way: "Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world—like a star at dawn, like a bubble in a stream, like a flickering lamp, like a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a mirage, a dream."

So as we sense this lack of solidity, we find we've jumped out of the plane, we don't have a parachute, but we start to realize there isn't any ground either. There's nowhere to crash. And so we can let go. We can

trust in our flight. We can trust in that unfolding.

We start to see that what there really is is the constancy of our big mind—this luminous emptiness that holds the universe, that holds all phenomena. It holds the arising and passing of all that is. This is our reality: this luminous emptiness and the ten thousand phenomena. And in the middle of all that vastness, we find birth and death.

But birth and death aren't the whole show. They're only a part. They're just a part of the comings and goings within that vastness. And that vastness itself is beyond birth and death. That vastness is undying and contains all the comings and goings. And this is the greatest mystery—that vastness and how it is untouched by all the coming and going.

I'd like to conclude with a poem. It's called "The Snowstorm" by Loren Eiseley, a naturalist. It's a little bit long, so if you'd like to get comfortable in order to listen, please do.

"It is the first and last snows, especially the last, that blind us most," Thoreau once said. And I wonder what he possibly could have been thinking, since snow is always with us and keeps falling in its proper season, the generations accepting it without first or last, save perhaps this: There is a single snow which a child stores in his memory—the first snow when he falls in a drift, the first snow that reveals secrets, like the flake on his sleeve, always to be remembered because it brought knowledge of crystalline perfection, infinite diversity to be tasted with his own salt tears—the immeasurable prodigality of the universal worlds in which we are lost, the first and blinding snow of childhood.

Second, the view from the farm window, the last, with the black guest waiting at the door and outside falling and falling across corn shocks, wheat stubble, plow land, the whiteness of the void. Lucretius must have so seen his atoms, created out of them a world. A wind whipped the flakes aside, perhaps—a snow flurry that conceived a farmhouse kitchen and a stove made fields.

Look, can you say I am not composed of snowflakes? My eyes are filled with them. They are falling faster now. Suppose I go outside and join them. Could you say that I was even here? No, no. The first blindness is to see the ultimate, minute perfection. That is the illusion of the water drop. The second is to believe the black guest at the door.

My friend, there is only the blindness of a million years of snowfall, and you and I race, race, discoursing as we fall. Do not bother to throw up the window. Snow is already blowing. The room is disassembled. Our substance, the room's substance, is snowflakes. We are falling apart now. We have reentered the eternal storm.

Let's sit for just a minute.

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