Accepting Life's Characteristics

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 49:16

You don't need to anymore. This is what it's like. It's sweaty, it's noisy outside, and you feel uncomfortable all day. So, you don't have to go.

I asked someone in an interview today how their retreat was going. And the person just sort of looked at me for quite a long time before they answered. I knew when I asked the question that that's a tough question to answer. What do you say—twenty-five words or less—how has your retreat gone? Nevertheless, I appreciate that each of you every day try to answer that question for us and do a pretty good job. Be prepared that when you go home you're going to get this question. People are going to say, "How was your retreat?" And what do you say?

If you say, "I was really happy all the time," well, that's not quite it. If you say, "Boy, I really went through a lot of suffering," that doesn't cover the times when everything was so beautiful and you were glowing. So I'll just give you a little tip. This is what I've worked out. I just say, "It was great." And that's all people usually want to know. End of conversation, so just a little tip ahead of time.

But the reason it's so difficult is that our experience keeps changing. We go through all these swings of mood and different body feelings and different degrees of concentration and being distracted by thoughts and spacing out and hurting and feeling wonderful. This changing experience of the retreat is really one of the most noteworthy features of the whole experience. Nothing in our experience lasts very long in this setting.

Sometimes you can be very happy about that. The concentration is totally shot in a sitting and your mind is all over the place. You can tell yourself, "This too will pass." Then the next sitting is very calm and wonderful, and you're really with the breath. You can also tell yourself, "This too will pass," and you'll be right.

The Buddha made a comment in one of his discourses where he said, "Foremost among footprints is the elephant's." I love this phrase. It's not something you'd hear from a teacher today, typically, but it was a reality for him and the monks and nuns back then. They were living in the forest and there were elephants and tigers and all sorts of things. It was part of the beauty of the old talks—you really sense how close to nature the people lived back then.

"Foremost among footprints is the elephant's. Foremost among reflections is that on impermanence." So he was pointing to the fact that if we want one topic always to remind ourselves of in any situation of life at any time, it is this fact of impermanence, of the changing nature of our experience.

The retreat is sort of a microcosm of our whole life in that way. We've become familiar with the changing experience here, but it's really no different in the world. I think that as human beings we tend to recognize that at a very early age. We tend to recognize that we're vulnerable. We realize that our death could come at any time and that there's a longing in us for a sense of security and safety in this uncertain world.

As we grow up, we tend to latch on to different things or people to try to bring about that safety that we really crave. We all have a very deep longing for safety and for security. So we start out as a child, and the safety really comes from our parents. We grow up and over time that becomes not safety but a hell of its own in certain ways. And so we make our break for independence to grow up as adults. We may try to find some of that safety again in an intimate relationship with a partner. We may find too that that has its own risks. Sometimes life shows us that in the hardest way possible.

I went to do a retreat one time, quite some years ago, a two-month retreat in Massachusetts, and I left my partner behind. We were in a committed relationship, and at that time she was not interested in going for a retreat. In fact, she had connected with a different spiritual teacher. She wanted to do her practice, and I went off to the retreat to do mine. As I entered the retreat, I thought, "This relationship is really the foundation of my life."

I should have known then I was in trouble.

I got out of the retreat and spoke with my partner by telephone, discovering that in the spiritual scene she had become involved with, she had grown very committed to this guru. I'll try to observe right speech here, though I may not entirely succeed. My opinion was, and remains to this day, that with this particular guru, there was only room for his students to have one love relationship—and that was to him.

As soon as I heard of her deepening commitment to this person, I felt the floor drop out from under me. I felt that bedrock I had counted on had just completely vanished. This brought up for me a whole swirl of anxiety, fears, uncertainty, pain, and suffering through what I experienced as the loss in that moment of the certainty of that relationship which had become so important to me.

To make a long story short, when we got back together, my partner—I shouldn't say saw the error of her ways—but saw more clearly some of the drawbacks or limitations of that particular scene, left the guru, and we resumed our relationship. So everything had a happy ending.

But it made very clear to me how much I had invested in that relationship in the way of security, because when it was gone—when I felt it was gone—the fear came up so strongly.

This is not to say that we shouldn't form relationships. When we do form relationships, there is apt to be a certain investment, because we care. We care for the other person. We care for our connection with them. But we must be aware that in our constant search for security, we may tend to put some of it in that kind of longing.

Commonly we turn for security to outer things like money or possessions or a nice home or our career or some kind of title or status that comes with that. And with the economy and the situation it's in today, we all know how uncertain these kinds of securities are.

We put our security often in the body. And we come into a situation like this and we see how the body can become a source of some discomfort, some anxiety. And of course, looking around the room, many of us are going through a relationship to the aging process. I know I certainly am.

It started for me quite a while ago. I still considered myself quite a young man—this was about ten years ago—but I was already starting to get some of these gray hairs. I was at a talk at a monastery in England with my partner, and I got up and walked away to talk to someone else. Someone next to her said, "Who was that man?" And she said, "What man?" And he said, "That middle-aged man you were just talking to."

When she told me later, I was really very shocked because I hadn't in the least thought of myself as middle-aged. But actually, I was about thirty-five at the time, and I thought, well, that's about halfway through the three score and ten, so I guess I am. And I started to relate to my aging process.

A friend of mine began to go bald when he was in his twenties. He said that for him, the hardest thing about it was washing his face. He said when he got to his forehead, he didn't know where to stop. I'm glad he had such a sense of humor about it.

So we look at many things in this life for a sense of safety, a sense of comfort, a sense of security, sensing our vulnerability as people. We're all in the same boat with this.

In Tibetan Buddhism they say that impermanence has four ends. They say that 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. These are sobering reflections.

We realize that our own death could come at any time. The fact of our death is certain. The time of our death, completely uncertain. And so we're extremely vulnerable in this situation. We realize that. We're not dumb.

We start to realize that we come to meditation practice because religions have traditionally been the refuge for people with these kinds of questions and these kinds of concerns over the ages. And so we may come to meditation looking for some ultimate form of security through our experience here.

But we come into a retreat such as this and we find again the truth of impermanence. Our experience is always changing. The breath comes and goes. The body feels great one sitting and is full of pain in the next. Sounds are appearing and disappearing. Thoughts are the most transient phenomena of all. Have you ever tried to really grasp a thought and find out what it is?

It's so fleeting and subtle, as are our mind states. We look more closely into the body through the meditative process and we find that the bodily sensations themselves, where we thought there was a solid

chest or a solid leg, we find there are only sensations arising and passing, sort of like points of light, as one teacher said.

One person came into an interview yesterday and said, "I'm starting to touch non-being." He said that when he was with his experience, his body was no longer there. So the bodily sensations become so subtle that at times we can't even touch the body. In meditation vocabulary we talk about this as the sense of the body dissolving in our experience. It's a phenomenon that many meditators have reported.

So we continue to look more and more closely. As Silvia said in her talk last night, becoming calm is the first step. Once there's a degree of calm, we don't just rest there, but we start to look around and see what we find, see what that calm mind can point out to us.

We stress in our meditation instructions some precision in noticing. We encourage you really to pay attention to the details of your experience, and it's for a reason. The very first day of interviews, someone came to the group meeting and posed what I thought was a really great question. The person said, "I'm really interested in opening my heart. Why are you giving us so much technical information on how to be with the process of breathing?"

This is a great question. I think everybody, I hope everyone in the course of their meditation experience has investigated and come to some relationship to this question. We really want with our practice to open up to the whole breadth and width of life, to touch the depths of life and to investigate all the questions that life presents. So why do we start with something as tiny and seemingly insignificant as our breath? And why do we put emphasis on noticing the beginning, the middle, the end, and the gap, and refining the attention there?

Part of it is so that you can begin to see very clearly for yourself this fact of impermanence on a moment-to-moment basis. When we investigate our experience in as much detail as we can bring to the looking, we see that even in a moment it's changing. It's not just that it changes from the course of the morning sitting to the evening sitting, but if we really look closely, our experience is undergoing change in that very moment. There is no moment when everything is static.

When I was a monk in Thailand, I practiced for a while with Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was one of the greatest meditation masters in Thailand of this century. He passed away last year, unfortunately. But we had the opportunity to meet with him for evening talks and discussions, just a handful of the Westerners who were at the monastery over this period of several months.

One of the instructions that he gave us in our meditation went like this. He said there are six sense doors—the five physical senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste, and then the sense door of the mind with the images, the emotions, the intentions and the thoughts that pass through. In each case there is a sense organ. For seeing, the sense organ is the eye. And then there is the sense object or the sight that arises at that sense door. And then finally there's the sense consciousness.

So for each of the senses there are three of what are called the sense bases: the organ, the object of the sense, and the consciousness related to that sense. With the eye, it's the eye, visible sights or forms, and then eye consciousness or seeing that actually arises. So we have six senses times three of these sense bases, or eighteen sense bases altogether.

He said, "Take those eighteen sense bases and for any experience you have in one of them, look at its origin, its nature, its arising and its passing." So he wanted us to look at eighteen times four phenomena with all our sense experience. In any moment that we're having experience, he wanted us to see one of these seventy-two aspects and to investigate our experience fully until we had convinced ourselves that there was nothing else going on but these seventy-two things arising and passing.

So we bring a precision into our awareness, not necessarily to that level. Let me give you an example. In that hearing, there is, first of all, the object of the sound, which is the striking of the cymbals. If you didn't have ears, you wouldn't be able to hear it. But because there is the object, which is the symbol striking, and you have ears, then hearing consciousness arises. So those are the three sense bases associated with this experience.

Now we could take any one of those. Let's take the hearing consciousness. We could look at its origin. It has a moment of arising which is conditioned by the striking of these objects. It has a nature, and that nature is just the quality of the sound. There's a certain pitch and a volume to it, and it has a moment in which it comes into being, which is its arising, and then it has its passing away.

So for the hearing consciousness, those are the four items to investigate. But we can apply that to any aspect of our experience. When we do, we find that all our experience at any of the sense doors is just arising and passing in this moment. There is really nothing solid to hang on to, even in one moment. Not just that your experience changes from one sitting to the next, but even in one moment, your experience is constantly coming into being and passing out of being at all the different sense doors.

Now you may feel this is a terrible tragedy, that nothing lasts. But it's really not good or bad. It's just the way life is. It's the reality of life. It's the truth. It's the law of how things are. Our entire field of experience is constantly arising and passing away.

The Buddha had an analogy for this. He said that if we try to cling to something in this field of experience, it's like a person being swept away by a river. They're in a raging river and the current is carrying them downstream, but there are grasses growing on the bank. They reach out and try to hold on to one clump of grass, but the current is too strong and it comes out in their hand and they continue to be swept away by the river. He said, that's what we're doing in our search for security in trying to hold on to what is inherently changing.

Another of my teachers, Joseph Goldstein, had an analogy that he said, it's like you jump out of the airplane and you find yourself falling through space. You realize that your experience is dissolving

beneath you and it's like you're falling through space and you forgot your parachute. This is a little bit the experience when we first start to touch that sense of impermanence in the moment, moment by moment. This analogy goes on, but we're going to leave you hanging for a while without that parachute.

So this transitoriness leads into the next of what the Buddha called three characteristics of this life. He said there are really three things you need to be aware of if you want to see this life clearly and deeply. The first is the truth of impermanence. He said the second is the truth of suffering—that as long as we're looking for security by holding on to what changes, we're going to suffer.

You can look at this in two ways. First of all, you can take a look at the pleasant experiences of our life, which is normally where we hold on. When something is pleasant, we hold on. But when it passes, then we tend to hurt. You can see this very clearly here. You come in for a sitting and the mind is still and settled. You're really connecting with the breath. There's a great deal of peace, discovering that calm. You go out for a period of walking. You hurry to come back in because now you've mastered the meditation, and you know you're going to pick up where you left off. And you come in. It's not there anymore. The mind is very active. The body has all kinds of energy going. There are thoughts and feelings. Where did the calm go? And we tend to suffer through the loss.

On the other hand, if we have a painful sitting, then we suffer directly. So if there's pain, we suffer. If there's pleasure and we cling, we suffer when it changes.

Ajahn Chah, another of the great Thai meditation masters of the last fifty years, said that it's like grabbing hold of a snake. If you grab the head, then it bites you directly and it hurts—that's the painful end of the snake. But if you grab the tail thinking you're going to miss the head, then sooner or later the head whips around and bites you, and you suffer then too. So if we grab at this life, we end up suffering. It seems to be what happens. Even pleasure can become a seed for later suffering.

The term that I'm calling suffering, the Buddha used the term dukkha. This is a Pali word that has not only the sense of suffering and mental anguish, but also just the sense of unsatisfactoriness or unreliability. We could say that there's an unreliability to life because we want security. We want there to be some reliable and lasting source of happiness and safety and security in life.

And yet the fact is that the world is unreliable in this sense. There's nothing in all the objects of our experience that we can guarantee will always give us that.

There was a monk staying at a monastery in Thailand called Wat Khao Tum—this means Temple of the Cave. After he died, people went into the cave and found out that he'd painted all sorts of wonderful paintings on the wall. One of the paintings was of a person in a monk's robe with a big smile on his face, and underneath was the inscription: "Oh, what joy to discover that there is no happiness in this life."

That's quite paradoxical, but what he really meant was there is no lasting happiness that we can hold on to, so we don't need to try. We can just surrender ourselves to being in this moment. We don't have to try

to find something that's going to last.

Suzuki Roshi, the founder of San Francisco Zen Center, 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."

This fact of unsatisfactoriness can seem kind of discouraging when we first start to connect with it. It doesn't hold out a great deal of promise on the surface. And yet this fact of unsatisfactoriness can be a tremendous inspiration to our practice. When we begin to see the truth of it, a lot of our outer-directed activities start to acquire a new perspective. We can approach our outer life without so much grasping, without so much longing for security, and the outer life lightens up, takes on a quality of being more playful, ultimately more happy.

But it also points us toward a different direction in our search for real happiness. The direction may be more inward.

So the Buddha said: "There is one thing, O monks, the not-seeing of which keeps you bound to suffering, keeps you bound in unhappiness. What is that one thing? It is the unsatisfactory nature of this life, the unreliable nature of this life."

The third of the characteristics that the Buddha talked about is probably the most mysterious of all, and in some ways the most difficult to talk about and hardest to understand. He called it a teaching on selflessness, sometimes called no-self. In the Pali language it's called anatta.

I don't want to spend a great deal of time on this third aspect tonight because it is quite subtle and difficult to understand on first hearing. But I will just say this: that the Buddha basically calls us to question this concept of "I" that we carry.

In some ways, it's the most natural and central part of human life, the sense of I. The Plains Indians had a name for the North Star, which was "Star that Stands Still." That's what they called it because all the other stars seemed to revolve around it. Well, that's a little bit like what our concept of I is for us. We sort of think that the I is the star that stands still in our center and everything else revolves around that.

And yet it's quite interesting because if you actually look for this star and try to find what it is that makes up you, it becomes vaguer and vaguer. The harder you look, the harder it is to find.

So let me ask you two questions right now that might point to some of this. I'll just ask you first: How tall are you and what color are your eyes?

Okay, everybody get those? Good. We're on the right track.

When I would answer the question of how tall I am, I would say I am 5'10". And normally we don't think twice about that, right? Well, is my breath 5'10"? Are my thoughts 5'10"? Are my feelings 5'10"? What's 5'10"? Isn't it just this body? So here we're expressing the idea: I am this body. I am 5'10".

What about when I asked you what color your eyes were? Did that seem jarring? No, that's a normal question. And you would say, "My eyes are brown."

Now I'm not my body—I'm someone that owns those eyes. Hey, those are my eyes. My eyes are brown. So which is it? Am I the body or am I something separate from the body that owns the body? Maybe we're not so clear on this I.

What if I ask you how you're feeling right now? Are you happy or sad? Light, or heavy? You might say, "I'm happy in this moment." So, are you your emotions? But another time we might talk about "my joys and my sorrows." So, are you something separate from your emotions that sees them, observes them, and owns them? Which is it?

Sometimes it seems like the most deep sense of I that we carry is this sense of being a separate observer. It's like I'm right in there behind my eyes, and I look out, and I can send my vision all around, and I'm observing through this sort of periscope. And that's what I really am—what's behind those eyes. So you can search and see if you find something there. Good luck.

What I would say is that we aren't really clear on this sense of I. And what the Buddha said is that it's really worthwhile looking at the question because all of our life revolves around this pole star of the I. Almost one hundred percent of our thoughts and concerns and activities revolve around this sense of I. And yet we don't really know what it is or if it is. Am I or am I not?

When I was practicing at Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery, we would go out every morning on alms round. This was a traditional way that over the past twenty-five hundred years monks have collected their meals. They go out with a begging bowl and pass through villages and houses. And when people feel to, they come to offer food as the monks pass by.

We had a particular route that we followed every day. We left the monastery about six in the morning and walked for about a mile and a half down a dirt road. Then we walked across the dikes between rice fields to houses of farmers that were actually out in the rice fields themselves.

This was a very, very beautiful walk because it was summertime. The young rice had been planted the month before and was starting to grow up with that fresh green of growing things. The sun was just coming up and streaming over the rice fields, reflecting off the water. We'd just be walking between these stalks of waving rice, going up to villagers' houses.

At each house, a couple of people would come out—one or two people—and put some food in our bowl. There wouldn't be a word exchanged. There would be no eye contact. We never even got the opportunity

to say thank you. That's just the custom in that country. Their support for those who meditate is such that they have a joy in offering. Then we would go on to the next house, come back to the monastery, get some more food from the monastery kitchen, and eat our one meal of the day at about eight o'clock.

I was walking this path with a friend who was another Western monk. It was just the two of us on this particular route every day. His name was Vasudhachara—that was his monk's name. We were starting to walk out from the monastery and Vasudha was walking in front of me because he was a senior monk. He stopped dead in his tracks and turned around to me. He said, "Guy, the ego is just friction." And then he turned around again and walked on.

I had quite a long time to contemplate this profound statement, because the rest of our walk continued in silence for about an hour and a half. So I pondered what Vasudha had said: "The ego is just friction."

Now, in Buddhist terminology, this word ego is simply another way of referring to our sense of self, or the sense of "I." We all carry this sense of ourselves, and we refer to that experience by the term ego. So I began to think deeply about this insight.

For those who may be interested, Vasudhachara eventually disrobed and returned to the States, where he now teaches meditation in Seattle under the name Rodney Smith. We've maintained our friendship over the years, and some of you may know Rodney. He teaches on the West Coast and also in Barre, Massachusetts.

This observation is truly fascinating: the sense of self really is a form of friction. We can discover this for ourselves in our sitting practice. From time to time, there's some sense of friction present—is that a fair statement? If you reflect on your meditation experience, you'll likely find there's some quality where the inner wheels seem to be rubbing up against something, creating friction through the process of our thought patterns, emotions, and feelings.

If we look closely into that expression of mind—which sometimes seems to be in incessant movement—we discover that this movement is generally directed toward trying to make things more pleasant for ourselves. We want to arrange life in such a way that we bring the pleasant into our field of experience while keeping the unpleasant at bay. If we examine the movement of our thoughts closely, this is generally the underlying trend.

We constantly find ourselves expressing preferences—liking this and not liking that, hoping for this and fearing that, trying to maintain this state and prevent that state from arising. There's this ongoing manipulation of both our outer situation and our inner situation, attempting to make everything conform to what we perceive as pleasant.

In this constant movement to change, we tend to resist what is. We resist what is actually here and now. I'm sure you've all had the experience of being in a beautiful spot in nature—by the ocean or in the mountains—and yet finding yourself caught in this incessant movement of thought: thinking about the

situation at home, what you're going to say to your partner, what happened at work the week before, how you're going to fix that problem when you return, how you're going to raise your children not to be as obstreperous as they seem to be turning out to be.

And in the middle of that mental conflagration, you might suddenly stop and say, "Wait a minute. I came here to be in a beautiful spot. I don't have to think about this now." When you open your mind, there's the beauty—the light on the ocean, the flight of a seagull, or the sun setting on a mountain peak. You open your heart to that beauty, just in that moment, and the experience is completely different, completely transformed through the dropping away of that self-concern and the simple opening to be with what is.

This same process occurs not only in beautiful natural settings, but right here on your cushion. As I'm sure you've experienced many times this week, you find yourself caught in some storyline about an outside situation. Finally it passes, and you come into contact simply with the breath. How relaxing! How peaceful! What calm! What delight! Just to come simply into this moment without resistance.

So we can ask ourselves: Where does this resistance come from? Why can't I always be in this state of acceptance and openness? When we begin to investigate, we see this is exactly the Second Noble Truth that the Buddha taught, which Sylvia mentioned a few nights ago—the truth that the cause of our discontent is wanting or craving. This constant movement, moment after moment, of wanting something else is precisely what prevents us from simply being here, now, and open to what is.

After the Buddha became awakened, his first discourse was on the Four Noble Truths. His second discourse was called the Fire Sermon. I'd like to read you a passage from the Fire Sermon. It begins like this:

"O monks, everything is burning. And what is the everything that is burning? The eye is burning. Visible shapes are burning. Eye consciousness is burning. The ear is burning. Sounds are burning..."

Auditory consciousness is burning. And he goes through each of the six senses. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of craving. Burning with the fire of hatred. Burning with the fire of confusion.

What the Buddha taught was that when we are involved with grasping, with this constant movement to make things better or make things right, we get caught in suffering. But he also taught how to find a place of coolness, how to find a place of stillness where the fire is extinguished, where the sense of burning goes out.

In our meditation, we begin to find that place of stillness through acceptance. Simply through accepting the way things are in this moment, we begin to find that place of coolness. And this place of coolness is one that is not based on grasping. It is not based on acquiring or sustaining or perpetuating. It is simply based on the resting that we find in a full acceptance of what is here and now.

We could call this state of mind a radical acceptance because it's so complete. It goes to the root of what

acceptance means. It's radical because in that moment we've stopped trying to shape or mold our experience to any degree at all, in any direction at all. And in that radical kind of acceptance, there's a very deep stillness that is very refreshing and very healing. It's a stillness that undoes a lot of conditioning, not only the personal conditioning of this lifetime, but even that old, old tendency to grasp, to crave, to make things different.

This process is described in every spiritual tradition, and they just have different names for it. In Vipassana, we tend to call it acceptance. If I were a Hindu bhakti, I might talk to you about surrender. If I were a Christian, I might talk about dying to the small life and being reborn to the eternal life. If I were a Taoist, I might talk to you about non-interfering. But all of these are pointers to the same process, which is letting go of wanting and simply opening to the truth of this moment, to what is.

There was an Indian teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj who lived in Bombay and died about ten years ago. He taught through dialogue. He didn't give long Dharma talks, but when someone came to meet with him, he would just talk with them about their questions. So one Westerner came and he told this Westerner, "The essence of pleasure is acceptance. Whatever the situation, if it is acceptable, it is pleasant. If it is not acceptable, it's painful."

The questioner replied that 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 is the ending of the self. The ending of the self with its desires and fears enables you to return to your real nature—the source of all happiness and peace."

This theme of acceptance is becoming so popular that Hollywood is starting to pick up on it. You know something's made the mainstream when you see it in big-budget movies. The one that particularly struck me over the last couple of years was Groundhog Day. The premise was that Bill Murray found himself in a situation visiting this small town on Groundhog Day, where the groundhog popped up, and found himself repeating the same day over and over and over. There was nothing he could do to move beyond that date. Every night he went to sleep, and when he woke up the next morning, it was still the same day, he was in the same bed, in the same town, and the same events started to repeat themselves throughout the day.

It started to drive him crazy. He tried everything he could do to get out of it. He even tried suicide. So he killed himself, but he woke up the next morning back in his bed with the same events of the same day going over and over. He finally realized, "Hey, I can use this. There's a woman I'm really attracted to. I'll get to know what line really turns her on and she'll fall in love with me." So he started to try to manipulate the situation to find his pleasure from it, to see what he could get from it. But fortunately or unfortunately, nothing worked.

All his stratagems backfired and he found himself waking up in the same day again and again. He finally became very despairing. He completely despaired of ever changing it, and he actually gave up hope,

completely gave up trying at that point.

And it was at that point that everything changed for him. When he settled into that day, just being that day, with all its ordinariness and predictability, beautiful things started to happen for him. He actually developed compassion for other people. And he started going around town fixing all the things that he knew were going to go wrong for other people on that day. And from that heart of compassion he actually discovered a real sense of love for another person and his heart really opened in a new way.

Now on one level this is just an entertaining Hollywood film. On another level it's a beautiful parable about the teachings of the Buddha. Because the way I read it, Bill Murray was imprisoned in the cycle of existence known as samsara, where we are repeating over and over again our birth and our death time after time. In a way, we're trapped in this endless cycle of becoming.

But when he gave up and accepted it just as it was and brought to that a feeling of compassion and love, the total experience was different. He found his freedom within that cycle and his heart flowered and he no longer resisted. And by the way, when that happened, the day turned over to the next day. So he truly was out of the cycle.

So this quality of acceptance, although it's a simple term and points to a simple truth that we can use every day, has a very deep meaning and a very deep significance. Part of what we need to accept are these three characteristics: the fact that life is changing, is unreliable, and that the sense of self is vague and perhaps illusory and can be questioned. Maybe there's really nothing there that we can call an I.

As we accept this truth, we find a peace in the moment that's not dependent on grasping, that's not dependent on carrying over, that's not dependent on holding onto. And it's a peace that's accessible in any moment when we come to that full acceptance, when we open our heart and don't look for anything beyond.

I'll just close with another quote from Maharaj, who echoes some of this feeling. He says that wisdom tells me I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything. And between these two poles, my life flows.

Let's sit for just a moment.

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