Accepting Ourselves

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:42

I'd like to talk this evening on the theme of acceptance. It's a theme that I often get reminded of, and because I've given a talk on it, I feel like I have to practice it.

It came up for me this past week, the first really beautiful day that we had after all the rains—I think it was last Wednesday. A good friend of ours called up in the morning and said, "Would you like to go flying today? I think it's going to be really clear. The rain's just ended. The sky's going to be crisp, really good visibility." So he booked a plane out of Petaluma, and my wife Sally and I went up with him.

We flew for about an hour and a half. We went over Point Reyes and then came back over Black Mountain, flew over Nicasio, and took a photo of a friend's house. The highlight of the trip was going to be flying over Woodacre where we live and taking some photos of our house from the sky, and then flying over the Spirit Rock land because we'd always wanted some aerial photos of Spirit Rock. Sally and I are both on the committee that's designing the new buildings up here, and we'd like to see from the air how they're located.

We were incredibly happy to be up there. It was a really clear day—you could see for fifty or sixty miles. We flew over Nicasio and were heading to Woodacre when the battery in my camera died. I had brought two spares, so I was feverishly unscrewing the little button on the bottom with a penny I'd pulled out of my pocket, meanwhile trying to keep my headset on and talk to the pilot.

It turned out my camera has two batteries in it, so I popped them both out and put the new ones in and screwed it back together. It didn't work. I took them out again, and I noticed we were flying over my house. Well, I hoped Sally was getting some photos with the other camera, because I wasn't. I tried putting the batteries in again, and I noticed we were over the Spirit Rock land and I wasn't getting any of it. The batteries still didn't work. I did it a third time.

My friend circled over the area twice, and all the time he was circling, I was messing around with these batteries. By the time I got the batteries in, he said, "Well, we've only booked the plane for an hour, we have to go back." So that was the highlight of my trip over Woodacre—fumbling with the batteries.

I started to get really frustrated. I could just feel this impatience and frustration and disappointment and anger coming up. Then I realized I could either make a scene about it or I could accept it. It was such a beautiful day and the flight back was so pretty that I decided to accept it. I'm glad that I have to talk about this from time to time because it really makes me more interested in trying to live it. But it's a lesson that I'm learning and working on all the time.

I'd like to talk about this theme of acceptance tonight. For me, it's one of the central themes of the Dharma. It's a really simple word, and we all go through little situations like that one all the time in our lives where we can open and accept something disappointing that's happened, or we can really work ourselves into a bind about it. That's the superficial level of the meaning of acceptance. But acceptance also has a depth to it that goes right to the very heart and core of the Buddha's teachings.

I want to talk about several different layers of this quality of acceptance. I want to talk first about the whole process of coming to terms with and accepting ourselves, which is a big area for acceptance. I want to talk about how it's a pointer to the heart of the Buddha's teachings. And then I also want to talk about the larger picture, which is an acceptance of life.

This question of self-acceptance is obviously a key one in our society, as you can tell by the popularity of somebody like Woody Allen, who's sort of the apostle of self-doubt, or Groucho Marx, whose famous comment was, "I wouldn't like to belong to any club that would have me as a member." There's also the popularity of books like *I'm OK, You're OK*, which was one of the very first pop psychology bestsellers.

Looking around the room tonight, I can see that many of us are of a similar generation where one of the things we have to work with in self-acceptance is relating to our aging. It's something that I've been working with for some years. I was just at a gathering, sitting with my wife, and got up and strolled away. This was quite some years ago—I still thought of myself as a young man. Somebody next to my wife said, "Who is that man?" She said, "What man?" They said, "That middle-aged man you were talking to." I had not thought of myself as middle-aged at that point.

This awareness of aging forced me to confront something fundamental about human experience. I was about thirty-five at the time—Oscar Wilde once observed that thirty-five is such an attractive age that London society is full of ladies and gentlemen who have, of their own free choice, remained thirty-five for years.

A friend of mine began losing most of his hair in his mid-twenties, which can be particularly difficult when you're young and single. He told me the hardest part was washing his face—when he got to his forehead, he wasn't sure where to stop.

We all must reckon with our aging, with the reality that our bodies become less reliable and perhaps less beautiful than they once were. This is simply part of what we must accept as human beings.

As human beings in the West, I believe we face a unique challenge. We may be among the very few cultures in human history that has grown up without a strong spiritual center to society. Only in the last century or so has the rise of scientific rationalism truly undercut spirituality as a central organizing factor in European civilization.

This shift has had tremendous consequences. We've grown up in such a secular way that many people now doubt there is any wisdom in the creative force of the universe—believing instead that we are merely

the outcome of some random chemical combination of molecules. This prevalent worldview is profoundly heartless.

This fragmentation—for scientific materialism captures only a fragment of life—has left its mark on our minds, hearts, and spirits. When Mahatma Gandhi was asked what he thought of Western civilization, he replied that he thought it would be a good idea.

D.H. Lawrence, one of my favorite novelists, came to America in the 1920s and lived in the Southwest, spending several years near Taos. He said this was when he felt most connected to religion in his life. Lawrence observed that Americans—meaning European Americans—were profoundly affected by the size and openness of the landscape in their westward movement. Yet while settling it, they broke the land, and something in them was also broken by its vastness and emptiness. American men, he noted, had lost their warmth and affection for one another, now living isolated and lonely with no real sense of community. This was in the 1920s.

Growing up without the support of a rich and integrative spiritual culture, I believe we encounter more difficulty than many in accepting the fullness of what it means to be human.

All human beings across time experience a range of feelings. We know the positive emotions—joy, happiness, enthusiasm, excitement. We also know the difficult mental states of fear, shame, anger, guilt, depression, and sorrow. We all know this whole spectrum.

Yet depending on our upbringing, we may have vastly different relationships to how we hold this complete range of human experience. I believe we've reached almost a crisis point in America where so many people find it extraordinarily difficult to accept this full spectrum of human capabilities and experience. Too many of us remain caught in judgments about which emotions are acceptable and which are not.

This represents one of the key thrusts of meditation practice: allowing us to explore all corners of our experience so that we come to know all corners of our minds and hearts—the light as well as the dark—and truly come to terms with the range of what we find there.

Meditation practice is not a path that carries us over difficulties to some remote pot of gold at the end. Meditation is a practice that takes us directly into the whole range of our human experience. Sometimes meditation brings very blissful, uplifting, joyful, life-giving, heartful experiences. Sometimes meditation brings us face to face with the most difficult parts of ourselves—raw experiences of fear, sorrow, loss, grief, anger.

We need to develop kindness in holding all of this. Even after years of practice, I continue finding areas that surprise me or trigger reactivity.

I was doing a personal retreat one winter in New York State not long ago. I had a little cabin in a beautiful

part of the state, on the edge of the Catskills in farming country. I spent two months there alone—October and November. A friend brought me food once a week, but apart from that, I saw no one for those two months.

I looked out over about a hundred acres of land that opened onto rolling hills and farmlands beyond. I could literally see for hundreds of acres without encountering another soul.

And I was just carrying on my practice of sitting and walking day after day in silence. October, with the weather turning and fall colors blazing, was quite beautiful. Then November came. November in upstate New York is the start of winter, at least it was that year. For about two weeks there was rain and hail and snow and high winds, and the skies were gray for two weeks straight. I did not see the sun.

I got frustrated first because I couldn't do my walking meditation. Like a foolish Californian, I'd forgotten to bring boots. I thought the first snowfall would come around Thanksgiving. All I had were tennis shoes and sandals. Finally, to do my walking meditation, I would tie little plastic bags around my feet with string—little produce bags—and go out and walk. But they wouldn't last very long. On the days it was raining or snowing, I really couldn't go out at all, so I felt quite confined.

It was getting quite dark. I was starting to feel lonely and sorry for myself. All of a sudden, I just wanted to be out of there. I'd had enough of this retreat.

There's a classical term for this experience in meditation practice. It's another of the five hindrances called doubt. The essence of doubt is: what on earth am I doing here? Some of you may have asked yourself that at Spirit Rock from time to time.

Doubt was coming up strongly for me. Since I talk about it, I thought I should know something about it. So I said, "Well, let's look at this. What's this doubt about?" I looked more closely and waited until the next time it came. What I saw was that just before the doubt came into my mind, there was an experience of real loneliness and despair at the situation—just being all by myself in this gray climate, being cold, not being able to walk. There was this self-pity and despair that I just couldn't stand. As soon as it came up, I wanted to escape.

Actually, for me the doubt was more about escaping what I was feeling than about it not making sense to be on retreat. When I understood that, the doubt went away. I thought, "Oh, that's what I have to do. I have to come to terms with that despair, which is still a part of me." When I realized that, the doubt was gone and I was back with despair—and that was real progress, I can tell you. It was a step in the right direction.

If we can't accept ourselves, if we have some idea that some parts of us aren't okay, then our inner life becomes quite tangled. We create a complicated web around our feelings because we're trying to allow some—the good ones—to come. We want to open to the positive things in life, but we don't feel we want to open to the difficult things, the negative side. We get in this habit of trying to support half of our

emotional life and suppress the other half. The only thing this leads to is deadness. We deaden our vitality when we do that.

We also create this division. We live life in a split way where there's a judger on one hand and the doer or the be-er on the other hand. The judger is always passing comments: Are you being acceptable or not? Is what you're feeling okay or not?

The interesting thing to investigate about that sense of judger is: where does it get its opinions? It's really founded on nothing. That judge is just a fragment of our belief system. One thing you can always be sure of is that the judger does not have the whole picture. That fragment does not contain the whole picture of the human being. Because it's an incomplete view, it's not reliable. But because there's that constant sense of tension, of judgment, we can't relax. We can't feel comfortable. We can't really come to a deep sense of inner peace.

If we can't accept ourselves, then we always look for acceptance outside of ourselves. If we can't love ourselves, then we need that affection and approval to come from out there somewhere. So we're always looking for it from others. There's this underlying sense of need in our relationships.

But here's the thing: if we really don't believe we're acceptable, we also don't believe the affection when it comes. The world is sending all of us messages of affection and caring and love all the time. Day after day we're getting those messages from friends, family, co-workers, sometimes from strangers. But if we have the view "I'm not lovable," we'll block them. Rather than change our view, we'll actually perceive that no one likes us or that no one cares for us. So even though the affection may come, it doesn't satisfy. We can't let the affection really sink in because we feel that it's just a matter of time before we get rejected.

I was on retreat once in England with a person who was really my primary teacher for years and years in my practice, an Englishman named Christopher Titmuss. We were practicing on this hillside right near the border with Wales, just a few miles up from where Wordsworth wrote "Lines from Tintern Abbey." It's one of the rainiest parts of a very rainy countryside. My difficult retreat experiences, I should have learned by now, have to do with weather. I was going through another period where in about three weeks the sun was out about twice.

I came into an interview with Christopher and I had not been feeling good about myself at all. Especially during my walking meditation, a lot of thoughts and feelings came in about not liking myself. I told Christopher that I was having kind of a hard time and he said, "In what way?" I said, "I'm having some difficult thoughts." I kind of hoped he'd stop there. And he said, "Oh, what kinds of thoughts?" I hadn't known Christopher for very long at that time and I didn't know whether I could really open up to him. But I told him what was going on with me and he very compassionately said to me, "You don't accept yourself. You have lots of good qualities, but you don't accept yourself."

So I took that as my theme for my meditation for the next few years in my practice. I had to come to

understand—I had to figure out for myself—what did it mean then to accept oneself? In Buddhism there's not supposed to be a self, is there? So what was I supposed to accept? That confused me for a while. I kept sort of waiting, thinking maybe I was going to come across in one of my meditation periods some inner entity, some little guy that I just had to wrap my arms around and then it would be all okay. That sounds kind of facetious, but in a lot of ways I think sometimes there's the expectation in our meditation practice that we'll have some kind of peak experience that will make all the difficult stuff go away—that we'll enter a period of everlasting light and bliss, sometimes referred to as the enlightenment retirement option.

But I think that it's a little bit of a misleading figment to think that way. One of the things that the Buddha said about this practice, one of the ways he described it, is that it's a gradual development. He said it's like the ocean floor sloping away from the shore of the land—it slopes away very gradually. So even though very interesting and intense and mind-opening and fresh, insightful moments do occur in this practice without a doubt—transformative moments—the idea that there's all of a sudden going to be a sudden switch from this mixture of light and dark into all light is misleading. This mixture will be with us for a long, long time, and the way that we work through it is just greater and greater self-acceptance.

What I finally came to in my understanding of what self-acceptance meant for me is it didn't mean finding any one thing that I had to accept. It meant being willing to accept my experience moment after moment after moment through all the changes that it went through. So it meant being willing to accept a moment of knee pain, being willing to accept a moment of fear, being willing to accept a moment of real opening and happiness, being willing to accept a moment of sadness or grief or a feeling of loss. I think this is a much better metaphor or model for our development in meditation—that we just develop a growing capacity to open more and more fully with more and more of our heart really being there to all the range of our experience, which is always changing.

Meditation also makes, I think, a unique contribution in the area of self-acceptance. A lot of what I've just talked about we could also find through psychotherapy. A lot of good therapists use similar language and point to a similar approach. But there's another, I think, unique contribution of meditation, and it has to do with what I'd call a very healing quality of mind, which is the quality of samadhi.

Samadhi is a Pali term, a term in the language that the Buddha taught in. It's usually translated as concentration, and it's one of the factors of the Eightfold Path, along with mindfulness and wisdom and effort and understanding. So it's a key term within the whole range of the Buddha's teachings. But samadhi, when translated as concentration, to me has a sense that we have to focus our attention down and be with just one object. When I say I'm concentrating, I usually mean I'm trying to pay attention to this and I don't want to hear that.

But samadhi doesn't have that flavor of exclusivity. Samadhi has a concentration flavor more in the way that frozen orange juice gets concentrated—it throws out the dross and retains the essence. I think the better word to translate samadhi is unification of mind or wholeness of mind.

So we can have this wholeness of mind, for instance, by being with the breath fully. That has the aspect of concentration. When I can be fully with the breath, then my mind is unified around a narrow object, a narrow focus, and samadhi is developing. The mind is coming together.

But we can also have that wholeness of mind with the attention very wide open. Some of you, I know, like to practice meditation with sounds. It gives a very expansive quality to the awareness and offers a kind of relaxation, especially if the sounds are natural. One can be with sounds that exist in a 360-degree field around us, where the mind feels very whole and very unified.

When the mind gets unified, it gets strong. It becomes stable and calm. This is the great value of this quality of samadhi. With that sense of strength and wholeness and stability comes a sense of well-being—experienced as peace, calm, rest, relaxation. As that sense of stability and peace grows in meditation, it becomes a very strong factor for mitigating or easing the painful states of mind and the painful experiences of life. We find within this quality of samadhi a place where we can rest.

As the meditation develops over time, that state of samadhi becomes more and more our natural resting place. One teacher explained it like this: In the beginning of practice, it's as though we're pushing a ball up a hill. We push the ball up the hill and get to the top of this curve where it can rest for a moment. In the early days of practice, we feel that we connect with the breath for a few breaths at a time, and we get a sense, a taste of that peace, of that unification of mind, of that calmness. But very easily, a few thoughts come along or some sounds disturb our concentration, and the ball slides off quickly to one side or the other.

Over time, that U-shaped curve flattens out. It gets easier to get the ball to the top where it rests, and when it rests there, it's not so pitched or sloped. It rests there more easily and for longer periods of time. As the practice continues, this curve actually inverts and goes the other way. The natural state of mind, after some time, becomes this resting in samadhi, this wholeness, this peace.

It still gets disturbed. Events come along—thoughts, emotions, mood swings, outer circumstances, situations—and we get flung out of that sense of peacefulness. But we develop this growing ability just to let the mind settle by itself, not to stir it up further, and it comes back to its place of rest again.

This place of rest has a very healing quality. It has its own sense of well-being that starts to soften the edges of difficulty. Without even doing anything with our difficult mind states—without doing anything with our fear or shame or grief or anger—they start to be worn away. This sense of peace begins to wash away many of the difficulties we may have experienced. I think this is a unique contribution that meditation has to offer to self-acceptance.

I also wanted to talk about the deeper dharmic theme of acceptance. I'd like to tell a story from when I was a monk in Thailand. I was practicing at a monastery in the south of Thailand, right out in the country—a forest monastery. The abbot was Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of the great Thai meditation masters

of this half century.

I had a little hut out in the forest. There were about eighty acres of forest and about eighty huts scattered throughout. Living in my simple hut, I couldn't see another person. It had just been carved out of the rainforest, and animals would pass through my clearing. Monkeys would swing overhead, and I could carry on my sitting and walking in this rather idyllic spot.

Every morning at six o'clock, a friend and I went out on what's called alms round. The tradition of Buddhist monks—and also the nuns when that order was alive, when that lineage existed—was to live on food donated by lay people. This tradition continues to this day.

We would leave the monastery at six in the morning with our begging bowls and head off down the road. We had a certain route we traveled every day, involving about a twenty-minute walk until we reached the farming area where the rice fields were planted. This was early summer, so a crop of rice was just coming up. The villagers we visited had their houses located out in the middle of the rice fields.

So we would walk on the dikes between the fields of growing rice, which were flooded, of course. We'd walk over these dikes and come up to one of these houses dotted around the area. The villagers knew that we'd be coming about that time every day, and one or two people would come out from each house, standing at the end of a lane or a dike from their house. We'd walk up. It was all done in silence. We'd simply take the lid off our bowl and they would put in the food that they were offering, close the lid up without saying a word or even making eye contact, then we would go on to the next house.

So we'd pass about six or seven houses to get our morning alms round, and then we'd walk back to the monastery. It took us about an hour and a half altogether. But it was a beautiful way to start the day.

I would go out with a senior Western monk who had been at the monastery longer than I had, whose name was Visuddhachara. Because he was a senior monk, he would always walk in front of me. So we would walk for most of the hour and a half in silence—I would walk behind him, he'd walk in front.

We were going out of the monastery one day on our traditional alms round, and Visuddhachara stopped dead in his tracks, turned around to face me. In a very intense way, he said, "Guy, the ego is just friction." And he turned around and kept walking. I, of course, followed him.

I had quite a long time to contemplate what Visuddhachara had said because our walk was about an hour and a half and most of the rest of the time was in silence. So I just thought: the ego is just friction. What did he mean by that? I actually came to a real appreciation of what Visuddhachara was pointing to in that statement.

By the way, for those of you who don't know him, Visuddhachara is now a lay person again also, living in the Seattle area and teaches meditation. His name is Rodney Smith. We're still good friends and still stay in touch.

The ego is just friction. Well, ego in a Buddhist context has a specific meaning. It means the sense of I. It doesn't mean a puffed sense of pride. It means the sense of I, or the sense of our self, oneself, as a separate entity—not a part of the whole, but a separate solid thing that kind of experiences the world. So it's in a way a center. We kind of make the ego a center of our existence.

A lot of the teachings of the Buddha encourage us to look closely at this sense of I, to see if it's real or not. Because it's such an easy thing for us to talk about—this really is the center of our life, the sense of I. Our thoughts and actions and wishes and hopes and fears all revolve around it. But the Buddha said when you look for it, it's very hard to find. It's very hard to discover what this sense of I comes from or where it is.

So the sense of I is just friction. We might notice this kind of friction sometimes in our meditation practice, because this sense of self, of separate self, often expresses itself through constant movement of mind. I'm sure you didn't have that experience tonight, but some people who meditate have that experience. They come to sit, and instead of being with the breath through forty-five minutes, as I'm sure most of you did, it's generally the case we can be with the breath for a few breaths, and then the mind goes away into thoughts—thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, plans, hopes, fantasies, expectations, desires, fears.

This constant movement and the emotions that come with it create this sense of unrest in us. It creates a sense of constant restlessness, and that restlessness carries with it a sense of not being fulfilled, of needing something else, a sense of insufficiency. When we're caught up in that effort, we really lose touch with the present moment.

I'm sure this has happened to you many, many times. You'll go out—it's a beautiful day like this past week has been. You'll go out to the beach or climb a hill at Point Reyes or some beautiful viewpoint and you'll just want to enjoy the scenery and the spectacular view. Perhaps you're up on Mount Tam. Rather than being with the view, all sorts of thoughts and images and emotions just keep flooding through, keep flowing through. You'll be dwelling on some situation with your partner or your children or your work or something that's coming up tomorrow. You forget why you're even there. You forget why you've come. All of a sudden a little light bulb goes off and you go, "I don't have to do this right now."

And you're right back there in the moment, with the beauty of the sunshine, the sun on the waters, the sound of the wind, the flight of a bird, whatever it may be. You're back connecting with the beauty of the moment as it is unfolding fresh from the emptiness of creation. So in that letting go of our self-concern, our self-interest, we can come back into this broader picture because life is always unfolding right under our nose. And all we have to do to contact it is to let go of this stream of self-interest.

Some of you may remember this quote from last week from a medieval Catholic poet named Angelus Silesius, who said, "God, whose love and joy are present everywhere, can't come to visit you unless you aren't there." So he's pointing in the same way, to the same phenomenon, that when we can let go of self-concern, there's an openness to a much bigger picture that's always emerging fresh.

Well, the Buddha was pointing to this kind of restlessness when he gave his very first discourse after his awakening. It was a discourse on the Four Noble Truths. The first truth is that there's unhappiness in life. The second truth is that the source of our unhappiness is wanting, is craving, is this restless sense of insufficiency that's always looking to be filled from something outside, from something other. And this is really where that sense of resistance comes from—this constant craving that feels like it's never enough. And so in indulging in that, in giving our attention to that, as we do much of the time, we lose touch with the truth, the living, breathing truth of this present moment. And it's being in that full presence in this present moment that we find our freedom, that we find our happiness.

The Buddha went on to say in his second discourse, which is called the Fire Sermon: "Friends, everything is burning. And what is the everything that is burning? The eye is burning. Visible forms are burning. Eye consciousness is burning. The ear is burning. Sounds are burning. Auditory consciousness is burning," and so on through the other senses. "Burning with what? Burning with the fire of craving. Burning with the fire of aversion. Burning with the fire of confusion."

So sometimes when the attention is quite subtle in our meditation practice, we can actually experience this relentless movement of thoughts and feelings as a kind of burning, a kind of restlessness that when we give ourselves over to it completely, it really erodes our inner peace. Peace is a natural state of mind when we don't interfere. But this constant doing that we're involved in—plotting for the future, regretting about the past—is a way of continually disturbing our essential peace.

When we start to accept, deeply accept, then we put an end to that constant churning, that constant restlessness. And this is really the teaching of the Buddha on the third noble truth, that the end of this restless craving is the end of sorrow, the end of unhappiness. And he equated it with this place he called nirvana, or this understanding that he called nirvana. So it was about finding an ultimate kind of peace, an ultimate kind of rest.

So we could say that this is a kind of radical acceptance that we come to in our practice, that we discover, where the mind finds its bearing in a way that isn't moving to any object whatsoever—is not moving to hold onto, is not moving to push away, is not disturbing that deep, deep peace. And this is a very healing and refreshing place in practice.

So this kind of radical acceptance wears away, washes away centuries of conditioning, lifetimes of conditioning, years of conditioning—the legacy of our upbringing, legacy of our parents and their parents before them, and even this movement of restlessness which has gone on, according to the Buddha, since beginningless time. All get washed away in this deep, deep rest.

This is really an aspect of all major spiritual traditions. In the Hindu bhakti path, you might call it surrender. In a Christian path, you might call it dying to the small self and being reborn to eternal life. In a Taoist path, you might call it non-interference. In Vipassana, we're rather more prosaic, and we call it acceptance. But it's really the same pointing.

I'd like just to close with a quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj, who was a Vedanta teacher of this century. He 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."

And this questioner said to him, "But pain is not acceptable."

And Maharaj says, "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."

So we'll close there and open it up for comments, discussion, questions, anything that anyone would like to share. Sometimes I can't see so well in the back because it's a little dark. So if somebody's got a question in the back, you might just feel free to speak up.

The question of balance between contemplative practice and engaged action touches the heart of spiritual life in our modern world. I've found that my own path has naturally organized itself into three distinct modes: periods of intensive meditation practice, often in solitary retreat; work to sustain myself materially; and service to others. Rather than trying to juggle all three simultaneously, I've taken chunks of time to focus deeply on each aspect. This approach has worked for me, though many practitioners successfully integrate all three elements into their daily lives.

What I've observed, both in my own experience and in the lives of many fellow practitioners, is that authentic inner work naturally leads you back into engagement with the world. The spiritual journey seems to move in organic cycles—periods of turning inward for contemplation and retreat, followed by a natural impulse to take whatever wisdom or understanding has emerged and offer it back to the world. These alternating rhythms of withdrawal and engagement appear to be an essential pattern in mature spiritual development.

This cyclical movement requires deep listening to the authentic call of each moment. Sometimes the pull toward solitude and inner work is stronger; other times, the world seems to be calling for our active participation. Neither withdrawal nor engagement is superior to the other—they are complementary aspects of a complete spiritual life.

It might appear that meditators are turning their backs on the world when they enter retreat, but Joseph Campbell's profound work in *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* illuminates the deeper pattern at work. Campbell identified what he saw as the one universal myth present in human consciousness: the journey of the hero or heroine. This archetypal journey follows a clear sequence—withdrawal from the ordinary world, the discovery of extraordinary inner resources, and then the return to share that discovery with others.

This same pattern emerges in the lives of the great spiritual teachers throughout history. The Buddha's six years of intensive practice before his awakening, followed by forty-five years of teaching, exemplifies this rhythm. Christ's periods of withdrawal into the desert, followed by his ministry in the world, reflects the same archetypal movement. The contemplative journey is not an escape from responsibility but a preparation for more effective service.

The wisdom tradition teaches us the art of acceptance and inner peace, while our Western heritage offers a strong foundation in activism and social engagement. Rather than seeing these as contradictory approaches, we have the unprecedented opportunity to discover their synthesis. This integration requires wisdom—the same wisdom captured in that familiar prayer about having the courage to change what we can, the patience to accept what we cannot change, and the discernment to know the difference.

These cycles are a really natural part of an ongoing spiritual life, requiring us to listen deeply to ourselves and feel which direction more strongly draws us at any particular time.

It sometimes looks like meditators turn their back on the world by going into retreat. But Joseph Campbell wrote this beautiful book that many of you probably know called *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which traces the archetype. He says there's one myth in human consciousness, and it is the myth of the hero or heroine. What that myth is about is withdrawal from the world, discovery of extraordinary resources, and then a return to the world to share that discovery. This is really the archetype for the life of Christ and the life of the Buddha, and many other myths around the world.

So I think one really has to listen inwardly to see where the call is. Because our culture is so outward oriented by our history—the West does not have a history of going inward apart from some very few contemplative traditions—I really encourage people where there's the urge to look within to follow that. Follow that and trust in that because it will lead you back. Don't worry about turning your back on the world for a limited period of time. Trust that call, and then when you come back, you'll have more to share. It's worth the journey.

*Question about anger:** Would you have anything to share to help us with dealing with accepting anger?

Anger is one of the things we do have to come into great acceptance with. It's one of the most difficult emotions we experience. In my mind, there are the big four—they aren't the classical hindrances, but in my view of meditators, the four that catch people are anger, fear, grief, and wanting. Anger is one of the big four, and it comes up on retreat and off retreat.

I think there are two things we really need to distinguish with anger. One is feeling the emotion in and of itself—this is the realm of meditation practice—to become comfortable with our experience of the emotion of anger.

The ways that anger manifests: first is that mental feeling, however you describe that for yourself—the hostility or aggression or resentment or whatever. There's a mental tone to that, an emotional tone. The

second is the way you feel it in the body, because strong anger has a strong impact in the body. I feel it particularly in the chest, the neck, the head. So really come to let yourself feel those body sensations.

The third way anger manifests strongly is in thinking. Often the thoughts are about: "They shouldn't have done this to me, why'd they do this to me, they had no right doing this to me, and what I'm going to do to them is..." So all the thoughts are going on at the same time.

To become aware of those three aspects of the experience of anger—that's the constellation. It's the thoughts, the emotion, the body sensations. That's what in meditation we have to come to really open to and let ourselves feel without the judgment that it should go away or that it shouldn't be there. That's the belief that really interferes with the quality of acceptance.

So it's really helpful if we can bring an attitude like we're observing any other part of nature. Emotions are part of human nature. Can we bring that same kind of eye that we would have coming across a bobcat in the wild? Can we bring that same kind of awareness to the nature of anger when it comes?

This is what meditation practice is ideal for if you have a quiet period to do that in. The difficulty with anger is we often feel it and have to relate at the same time, and that's what takes a lot of skill. The more skill you can acquire in just being with anger in a quiet way—sitting on your cushion, alone, in nature, whatever way you can experience it in solitude—that's a very helpful foundation for acceptance.

Acceptance takes some of the element of conflict out of anger, brings in more spaciousness, and gives us a foundation so we can still relate in a way that's not so controlled by the anger. So the difference is that we want to accept the experience of it. We don't necessarily want to act directly out of it because that can be destructive for others as well as ourselves.

I find the growing ability to accept it, just for what it is, gives me a spaciousness that means my speech and my actions aren't so controlled by the anger. I can maybe think a little bit about what a sane person would say in this situation before I put my foot in my mouth.

*Response from participant:** One tool I've used to free me from my anger a little bit is to have the understanding that much of my anger is self-centered fear. When I relinquish my grasp, when I surrender myself, then I don't get trapped into the self-centered fear, and therefore anger is easier to release.

Beautiful. The observation was that when he realizes his anger has its root in self-centered fear, it makes it easier to let go of, and I think that's true and a very helpful insight.

Thanks.

I often find what's at the root of my anger is a feeling that I'm invisible. Somebody has done something to me that shows lack of respect because they haven't even seen me. And it brings up a fear that I don't really exist. That's kind of the root fear for me.

Okay, let's close with just a minute of metta meditation to close the evening.

For this metta period, I would like you to bring to mind a difficult aspect of your life. It could be a person. It could be part of your own experience. It could be a situation. It could be a group of people. Bring to mind some difficult aspect of your life.

Let yourself feel for a moment the difficulty that this brings you. And hold the situation, the person, the aspect in your mind with an image or a sense in your body, your thoughts, whatever's helpful.

And in this case, we'll direct the loving kindness to ourselves in relation to this situation. In contact with this, may I be safe and protected from harm. May I develop a sense of peace. Even though it's difficult, may I find within me the capacity to accept this difficulty. Even though I might normally contract, may I allow myself to hold this situation and let my heart be fully open. May I live with peace. May I live in happiness. May I live in freedom.

Just a couple of short announcements to close. Next Monday, the sitting will be led jointly by myself and Fred Wapipa. Fred is a wonderful Native American teacher who lives in the area. I'll be doing the meditation, basically the silent part. Fred will be doing the talking part. That's the way I like it.

Sylvia's class will happen this Wednesday, although Sylvia's out of town. Someone will be leading it. I'm not sure whom, but someone will be there.

And I just wanted to mention something about our family program. For those of you who are not aware of it, Spirit Rock does have an ongoing program for children, really of all ages. We're thinking about now starting a program, a special program for teens, separate from the younger children. And we're really working to make Spirit Rock a place where children of all ages will feel at home, will feel that it's their spiritual home from a young age.

So we will be inviting children to come from time to time from the family program, which meets in the dining hall on a Monday night, and interact with the group here. And, of course, the invitation is always out for children to take part in the meditation periods and the Dharma talks here of a Monday evening.

Okay, hope you have a good week.

Just one comment. We do sell cookies on Monday evenings that support the children's program, and if somebody left their black pocket knife on the cookie table this evening, I have it. So thank you for all your support, and see me afterwards.

Thanks for coming, and good night.

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