Motivation In Practice

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:19

I wanted to talk tonight about motivation in our practice. The first thing I want to say is that sometimes when you hear someone is going to talk about motivation, you might wonder if something is wrong with yours. Are they telling me this because there's a problem here? I want to say up front that this is not a remedial talk.

I'm very touched every day by the people that I meet and the extraordinary amount of motivation that everyone is bringing to their practice. This is not in any way an attempt to fix anything anyone is doing, but rather to share some reflections from my own practice and observations that I hope might speak to you or touch some points that we share together. I'd especially like to dedicate this talk to those of you in the room who were the best yogi today—because I know you all had really fine motivation.

In the interview groups today, some of us looked into the question of what we're doing here. In my group, I asked the people I was meeting with to look and see what their deepest intention was in undertaking this retreat. Being here for three weeks is a long time—it's essentially infinite once you get into it. You'll feel that it's a long time.

There were a lot of really beautiful answers to that question. You could tell that everyone in the group had done quite a bit of practice before. There were answers like healing—healing of the body or healing of the heart—opening of the heart, wanting to look into the arising of the sense of self. Where does this mysterious thing called "I" come from? A greater ability to rest in our true nature, trusting that at the center we're all pure in the sense of wisdom and compassion, and being able to rest more in that. Becoming less reactive from our conditioned or habitual reactions. Learning to listen more deeply within ourselves. Being able to connect again and again with a deep sense of peacefulness and calm.

These are all really beautiful intentions, and they're intentions that can sustain you over a long period of retreat.

We ask this question for two reasons. One, it helps us to know what you're here for, because then we understand better your process and can better guide where you might want to go. But also because there's this age-old truth that what somebody else tells us we don't remember very well, but what we tell somebody else we remember really well. The hope is that by speaking your intentions aloud, you would remember them, and when the time comes in the retreat when you start to wonder what on earth you're doing here, these ideas might come back to you and help you find your way, find your direction.

I love the way that Sylvia put it last night. If I remembered correctly, what we're doing here is discovering

and cultivating our natural capacity for wise discernment and compassionate response. I really like this statement because when you look at it closely, it actually includes the whole of the Eightfold Path. There's the compassionate response, which is the area of conduct. There is the cultivation of a natural capacity, which is the whole area of mental training or meditation. And there's the development of wise discernment, which is the area of wisdom. So conduct, meditation, and wisdom—this really is the Eightfold Path all in one sentence. It's a good little formula to remember. It says a lot.

But this quality of intention is itself a very root quality. We touched on it last week, for those of you who were here, when we talked about karma and how the whole unfolding of our journey—the spiritual journey—takes place according to the laws of cause and effect. That cause and effect concatenation or unfolding begins from intention. Intention is the seed that forms the heart of our actions.

In Tibetan, they say it this way: everything rests on the tip of motivation. If our motivation is pure and wholesome, our whole unfolding will be beautiful and pure. If our motivation and intention are in the direction of liberation and spiritual deepening, then that's the way our life will unfold.

There's a tremendous power when we incline the mind in a spiritual direction. This force of intention is tremendous in a very mysterious kind of way. I can't even begin to understand all the workings of it. But I know that the mind contains everything within it—contains all potentials. When we urge it and feed it and nourish it in a given direction, it has the elasticity, it has the pliability, and it definitely has the talent to grow that way. So all the intentions that were mentioned earlier in my group will all help unfold your being in a very beautiful way, in a way that leads to a lot of blessings.

You know, this term "attachment" is kind of a dirty word in Buddhist thought, but the Buddha himself didn't always view it that way. He was giving instructions to the monks one day, and he uttered this verse: "Let not a person revive the past, or on the future build their hopes. For the past has been left behind and the future has not been reached. Instead, with insight, let them see each presently arisen state. Let them know that and be sure of it, invincibly, unshakably."

One who dwells thus ardently by day and by night—it is he or she who has one fortunate attachment. If we're a little attached to our intentions, that's perfectly fine. That's a fortunate kind of attachment. This abiding in the present and being able to see each presently arisen state, dwelling ardently, is a fortunate attachment.

So all these intentions lead in the direction of the beautiful. They all lead in the direction of happiness. And yet each intention has its own flavoring, its own character or personality. The intention of healing, for example, has a different flavor in our life, in our heart, than the intention of seeing the nature of the self—the personal I, the small self that arises. It has a different flavor than the interest in simply abiding in peacefulness.

Because of these different flavors, different people, as you practice here, will have different outer forms. I

think of it a little like a recipe book. If you want to bake a soufflé, you have to be delicate with it. You can't go stomping around the kitchen, and you don't crank up the heat to the highest level. You may have to turn it up for a while and back down to get the browning just right on top.

In healing also, there's a delicate balance of the heat or intensity of practice that's needed. So someone who is here primarily to do healing of body or heart might have an outward form where the temperature isn't so high—the intensity of their retreat is not as high.

Someone who is here to really look into the structure of the self—maybe that's more like baking a pizza. You can't do much to hurt a pizza. And so you can crank the temperature up and really go for the sittings late at night and early in the morning. Be really meticulous with your noting, slow down and be very precise, very present, put in maximum effort. That's the way you'll see how the self is put together.

As you start to get a sense of each other over these days, please have an understanding that different people are practicing with different intentions. They're all wonderful. And as you practice with different intentions, the outer form might look different. So please have respect. If you're one of the more speeded up ones, try not to knock over the people who are going at what we call "snail's pace vipassana" in the lunch line, in the walking room. Just be sensitive to those who are really slowed down. If you're really slowed down, also try to be spacious and loving toward people who are going a little faster. We're all doing just the work that we need to do.

An interesting thing about motivation is that it itself is a factor of the path. I'll talk later about how it fits into how the Buddha discussed it, but it itself is a factor of our awakening. And as such, it develops as our practice develops. The motivation isn't a static thing that we take up in the beginning of practice and remains the same until the end. It's a living thing. It's something that grows when it's supported by understanding, when it's supported by loving-kindness, when it's supported by balance of mind.

Particularly when we come into retreat, those of you who are starting a retreat now, the motivation will feel very different today than it might a few days later. I know when I start a retreat, I usually get preoccupied in the first couple of days with one goal: I just want to make myself more comfortable. Peace, freedom, liberation, healing—forget it. I just want to sit for an hour without my back aching. I just want to find out when I can take my shower and not have to scramble in the bathroom. I want to know that I'll be able to eat the food, that I'll be able to sleep at night.

So I find in the early days of retreat, my mind is turning around a lot of little issues. If you've seen the mind turning that way today, that's fine. That's normal. That's just part of the settling-in process. And with it, there may be a little struggle with not being at home in the body yet because it's kind of achy, or not being at home with the mind because you've told it to stay on the breath, but it's really all over the place—past and future. You may find yourself wishing you were somewhere else altogether.

This kind of struggle is really natural in the early days. It's just an indication of the settling in. And then

somehow after a couple of days, something just seems to click—usually for me and I know for a lot of people—and suddenly a factor of acceptance comes in. A deep factor of acceptance. And the mind that was struggling with the body pain can now be still in the middle of it. The mind that was struggling with wandering and being away from the breath can now accept it in a non-judging way. It's okay that the mind goes off. That's what minds do. So then the motivation becomes a little more pure.

Instead of trying to make ourselves comfortable, we realize, oh, I'm comfortable enough. And the motivation becomes, ah, I don't need to change my experience now. What can I learn from it? This is a really wonderful shift because we become open to our experience, to our life in a much deeper way, a much more authentic way. We don't need it to be a certain way. Rather, we can just be a student and say, how is life, and what can I learn from it just the way it is?

When our motivation is strong, everything in the practice seems workable. It's such a key influence. When we're interested, when we're excited, when we're enthusiastic, when we're passionate, when we're dwelling ardent, as the Buddha said, everything else seems workable. The ups and downs of the heart, the aches and pains of the body, the restless mind—it's all okay. But then from time to time the motivation seems to go somewhere south, and we really wonder, what am I doing here?

So I want to look a little bit at the cycles of motivation in practice and also talk about some enduring kinds of motivation for us.

I was on a self-retreat a few years ago. I had just decided that I wanted to spend some time not in a group and not having an external schedule. Some friends have a cabin in upstate New York that they offered. So I went to stay there for two months—actually the months of October and November. It's out on about 500 acres of farmland, and from the cabin I couldn't see another house. I was really quite alone, quite secluded in a beautiful natural setting.

My friends lived a few miles away and once a week one of them would come over and ask me what food I needed, then she'd go out shopping for me and bring me the groceries. Then I might not see her again for a week. So I spent those two months really very much on my own.

Well, I was a California kind of guy, and I thought October and November, pretty good weather, snow usually doesn't fall until about Thanksgiving. So I just showed up in my Birkenstocks and my sneakers. Big mistake.

This year in upstate New York, the snow started to fall about the 1st of November. And all of November was really snowy. So from about the 1st of November till the 15th, every day it was snowing or it was raining or it was cloudy and I didn't see the sun. Because I only had sneakers and Birkenstocks, it was getting really difficult to do my walking practice outside. My feet were getting cold and wet and my shoes were soaked, so I was getting discouraged about that.

What I did finally was take some plastic produce bags that my friend had bought groceries in and tie a

plastic produce bag around each foot. So that was my makeshift boots. Then with my plastic produce bags I could go do my walking meditation out in the snow. I'd clear a walking path and go walking in the snow and then I was fine. The produce bags would last about a day and they'd rip through and I'd have to put new ones on.

The days went by and the sun didn't come out and the snow kept falling, the wind kept blowing, and I was all alone on this mountaintop. I started to really get discouraged. I just started to feel, what am I doing here? You've probably heard that phrase once or twice in retreat yourself. And I thought I should really go back to California. It'd be much better. I know there'll be some sunshine still in the Bay Area. It'll be a little warmer. I'll at least be able to walk outside.

But unfortunately, I'd sublet my house. So I really had nowhere to come home to.

Then one day I came down from a sitting and I looked out the window and it was snowing again. And I just felt, I just want to get out of here. I just didn't want to stay. And of course, we have a name for this in our practice. We call it doubt. When you don't feel like being here, we recognize it as a hindrance, and it's called doubt.

So I got sort of curious. I thought, well, I teach about this. I ought to know something about it. So I started looking at it, and what I saw is that that urge to get away was coming up right after I had a really uneasy feeling. The weather and the grayness and the isolation, the solitude were bringing out in me some kind of despair. It was like touching some part of myself that I really wasn't comfortable with.

I wasn't used to feeling that despair, that loneliness. I didn't like it. And the doubt wasn't really because I didn't like the weather or because it was cold outside. It was because I didn't like this feeling in my heart.

When I saw that, I could say, "Oh, so I just need to open to that despair." And when I could accommodate it, then it was okay again.

It was a really good lesson. My motivation had gone away because I was experiencing something I didn't like. It was really, really simple. This often happens when motivation drops. Do you notice your motivation doesn't usually go away after your best sitting of the retreat? You know, you come in and you have forty-five minutes where you're really settled and really with the breath, and after that you start thinking, "Oh, maybe I'll sign up for two months next year, or maybe I'll go sit the three-month course in Barre."

But when doubt comes in is when there's been something difficult. So this is a really good pointer. When the motivation drops, take a look and see: what was it that was difficult? What in your experience did you have trouble opening to? What did you have trouble accepting in yourself?

Sometimes we get discouraged in practice because we want something special. There was one retreat I was on where I had heard about this particular insight into impermanence, and I really wanted it.

Everybody was talking about it. Books were talking about it. Teachers were talking about it. I thought, "I should have it." And I tied myself up into knots looking for this one particular experience about impermanence. When it didn't come, I got very frustrated, I got very judgmental, and I felt basically like quitting. Didn't get it that whole retreat.

A few years later, I got it. Not such a big deal—hardly worth worrying about. But sometimes the discouragement comes because we're expecting something special. So look at that too. Is there a special result you're seeking?

Sometimes starting a new retreat, we want to repeat a really favorite experience from our last retreat. But the funny thing is that favorite experience often happened eight days in, or ten days in, or longer. But we want it back the first day. "Oh, that should be happening by now." So look and see if there's an expectation about some particular experience.

Sometimes in retreats we want some special experience because it validates us. It validates us as a good meditator. It validates our experience. And we can get disappointed if it's not happening.

Sometimes in practice we hit these periods that are a little bit like a plateau where things are going along smoothly, but it's not very dramatic, and we think, "Oh, nothing's happening now." Actually, those plateau periods often have a lot going on under the surface—a lot of integration, or a lot of gathering of energies, preparing for another deepening—but it may seem like nothing special's happening. At times like that, Joseph Goldstein, one of my teachers, used to say that he would just tell himself, "Look, your job is just to sit and walk. The Dharma takes care of all the rest." So we can remind ourselves of that. All we have to do is sit, walk, and be present. Everything else is up to the Dharma, not our responsibility.

Sometimes in times of low motivation I really take a lot of inspiration from other meditators. I was sitting in the fall in Massachusetts for six weeks, and there was a woman who was sitting with me named Anne Creamer. She's someone I've known over the last several years, and I've come to have a really deep affection and appreciation for her.

Anne is seventy-seven years old. I know she wouldn't mind my sharing that because she tells everybody who'll listen. She lives in Santa Fe with her sister Rita, who is eighty-one.

Then my mind became free.

I saw clearly the difficulty of this world, this samsara. My heart came to rest. As I stood there, I saw the immense suffering inherent in existence. My meditation deepened, my mindfulness strengthened, and my bondage was torn apart. Only then did I sit down at the foot of the tree, profoundly happy and peaceful.

I had reached the end of suffering. All my fetters were severed. That was a nun's commitment—and fortitude.

There's another story that I find equally inspiring about a woman named Vasitthi. She had an especially

difficult life by any standard. She was a courtesan, and had been abandoned by her lover. She had a child who died, and then she herself became quite ill. She was poor and had to resort to begging for survival. When she heard the Buddha teach, she also ordained as a nun.

After her ordination, she practiced with tremendous dedication. But even after years of meditation, she still had not reached awakening. She was getting quite old, and began to worry that she would die without having achieved realization. Then one day, she was doing walking meditation, and she tripped. As she was falling, in that moment of completely letting go, her mind opened and she awakened.

She left this beautiful poem: "I was a courtesan, elaborately dressed, my mind was intoxicated with my own beauty. I looked down on other women. Then old age came upon me, destroying my beauty. My body became weak and shaky. I've lived in the forest, lived in a hut, meditated at the foot of trees. I have reached the state of no-desires. I have done what the Buddha taught."

These women inspire me so deeply. They faced tremendous difficulties—physical hardship, emotional turmoil, years of unrewarded practice—and yet they persevered. Their faith in the Dharma carried them through periods when they might have reasonably given up.

Just then my heart was set free.

We may presume that she untied the noose, returned to the community, and left us this amazing poem. Sometimes in the depths of discouragement, liberation breaks through when we least expect it. Sometimes when we're pushed to an edge we didn't know we could tolerate, some of our greatest openings come—unexpectedly, completely as a surprise.

That's one story I cherish from the early women practitioners, but there's another that moves me even more deeply. This is the story of a nun named Patachara. I'd like to tell you something about her life before she encountered the teachings, because I think it's profoundly moving.

She was brought up in northern India in a fairly well-to-do family. Her father was a banker. The family was stable—the mother was at home, and she also had a brother. It was a family of four, and she was well looked after. As she came into puberty, her family arranged a marriage for her with a suitable young man in the same village. It would be a match of equals, and she could have expected a very comfortable middle-class lifestyle from this arranged marriage.

However, Patachara, for better or for worse, had fallen in love. The person she was in love with was a servant in the village—not somebody who in that rigid caste system was considered her match or equal for marriage and child-rearing. Her parents forbade her to be with her lover and insisted that she carry out the arranged marriage with the other young man.

Patachara wouldn't do it. She ran away from home with her lover. They settled in another part of India and made their living through simple trades, but got by. She became pregnant, and she felt that having

this child far away from her family was dangerous. So she said to her husband, "I know I haven't spoken to my family for a long time, but I want to go back and have my child in my parents' home, because I feel I'll be well looked after there."

Her husband agreed, but he kept procrastinating. Finally she saw he wasn't going to do anything, so she took off by herself. He realized she'd gone and made haste to catch up with her. They reached her parents' home, she had the child safely, reconciled with her parents, and then returned to where she and her husband had been living with their newborn baby.

She raised the child, a few years passed, and she became pregnant again. Again she said to her husband, "I'd like to go back to my parents' home to have our second child." He agreed but kept procrastinating. So again, she took off by herself with the eldest child.

They were on the way to her parents' home when a great storm broke out. The husband realized they had left and made haste to catch up with them, arriving just as the storm was breaking. Great rains were falling, the wind was blowing, it was cold. The husband set off with a machete to chop down trees and branches to make a shelter for the night. While he was in the forest gathering materials, he was bitten by a poisonous snake and died on the spot.

When he didn't return, Patachara went looking for him and found him dead. Just at that time, she began to give birth to her second child. In the middle of this intense storm, as rain fell and winds howled and night was falling, she gave birth alone. All night long she tried to cover both children with her own body, having no shelter. She let the rains fall on herself while trying to keep her children dry. They survived the night.

In the morning she picked up the newborn baby, led the older child who could walk, and made her way grief-stricken toward her parents' home. They came to a river mightily swollen by all the rain. It was too dangerous for the youngest child to cross alone, so Patachara carried her baby across and set it down on the other side. As she was recrossing to get her oldest child, a hawk swooped down from the sky, picked up the newborn baby, and carried it away.

The mother screamed at the hawk to let go, but it didn't. The newborn was gone. But the older child thought her screams were calling him to come, and he plunged into the river and was swept away by the flood.

Within twelve hours, Patachara had lost her husband and both children. Totally devastated, she continued alone to her parents' village. When she arrived, she saw a villager on the outskirts.

And they recognized each other. She asked him to share news of her family, but he replied, "Ask me anything but that." When she insisted, he reluctantly told her that during the previous night's storm, her parents' house had collapsed, killing her mother, father, and brother.

Having lost everything in the world, Patachara went mad with grief. It was completely devastating, completely overwhelming, and she descended into insanity. In her state of grief, shock, and madness, she could no longer care for herself. It is said that she wandered throughout that part of India, her clothing wearing through and falling away. Much of the time she wandered naked, and when people occasionally gave her rags to wear, these too would wear through and fall off.

This is where her name originates—Patachara means "cloak wearer." When she approached villages, people would drive her away, saying, "Here comes the mad woman. Drive her away."

Finally, during one of her wanderings, she encountered the Buddha. In her state of incomprehension, unable to understand what was happening around her, and wearing no clothes, she approached him. The Buddha said simply, "Sister, please recover your mind."

With that simple statement, he brought her out of her insanity and she recovered her senses. Seeing that she stood naked among a group of people, she accepted a robe someone offered and covered herself.

Then she had this interchange with the Buddha. "Help me," she said, and told him her terrible story.

He replied, "Patachara, don't think you have come to someone who can help you."

What an incredible statement—don't think you have come to someone who can help you. He continued, "In your many lives, you have shed more tears for the dead than there is water in the four oceans."

This made her grief less heavy. He went on to explain that when she herself went to another world, no kin could help her, and that even in this world, no kin can truly help. Then he taught her about the Buddhist path.

When he had finished, she asked to be ordained. The message was that he could not help her because she had to come to understanding herself. She had to find the motivation and interest to look deeply and closely into life for herself.

Patachara, ordained as a bhikkhuni, received the teachings and then practiced. She was not one who heard and understood immediately—she too had to practice. This is the poem she left:

When they plow their fields and sow seeds in the earth, when they care for their wives and children, young Brahmins find riches. But I've done everything right. I followed the rule of my teacher. I'm not lazy or proud. Why haven't I found peace?

We can do everything right in our practice, and still the karmic accumulations, the habitual conditions of mind, are so strong that it can take time to release them, to break through them. "I've done everything right—why haven't I found peace?"

Bathing my feet one day, I watched the bathwater spill down the slope.

To me, those lines have such a sense of clear seeing—not a great intrusion of "I" or "mine" or owning or confusion, just bathing the feet and watching the bathwater run down the slope.

I concentrated my mind the way you train a good horse. Then I took a lamp and went into my cell, checked the bed and sat down on it. I took a needle and pushed the wick down. When the lamp went out, my mind was freed.

And then she herself became a great teacher, said to have brought awakening to a number of other nuns, a number of other bhikkhunis.

This story really touches me deeply because it's hard to imagine a greater need for healing than Patachara's. It's hard to imagine a heart more wounded than hers. And yet even through this difficult work of healing from madness of the most extreme kind, and practicing for years—you know that she felt the residue of that difficult period all through her being—just with the steadiness of attention and that opening of clear seeing, the freedom came, the freedom dawned.

This kind of story points me to certain turning points in motivation that I wanted to mention. First is when we first come into the practice and we see the potential for some easing of our suffering, some possibility of greater peace. I still remember how powerful my first retreat was for me—touching a depth of peace I had never known before and how sweet it was, how satisfying that peace was. It really gives us faith that the third noble truth is for us. This possibility of the end of suffering is for us. It's not just people in old stories that find this kind of peace, but it's you and I, here, today, now, who can find this peace.

And from that faith then comes effort. Actually the Buddha drew this link in a teaching called The Chain of Dependent Arising in the Transcendental Sense—that suffering led to faith and faith led to effort, and effort basically led to happiness and release. So we undertake the practice and we find that we can discover more peace, we can discover more happiness. A greater degree of contentment comes in.

But this itself can be a turning point in motivation because if originally we practiced in order to heal, in order to overcome suffering, when the contentment comes, then what are we here for? What are we here for if the suffering isn't weighing so much?

I was in a three-month retreat one time and I had an insight that I thought was kind of special. It brought me a lot of really kind of amazing sense of freedom. So I went to tell my teachers about it, and I thought they should think it was kind of special too. And they didn't seem to think it was very special at all. They didn't seem to make a big deal about it.

I'd actually been sitting in my room for a couple of days after I had this insight, just reflecting on what a special insight this was. And then they said, "Nah, no big deal." One of my teachers actually said to me—she'll remain nameless—"You're not very deep. I can tell by the way you walk in the room, you're not very deep. So-and-so"—and then they named a good friend of mine who was also sitting—"so-and-so is much deeper than you are."

We promise not to say that to any of you.

And I got a little discouraged, because I still thought it was a pretty cool insight. And far from being appreciated, I felt like it was not appreciated at all. So I became very discouraged at this point. For the rest of the retreat, I felt like I was just kind of wandering and struggling to keep up with the schedule. It was actually many years later before I met a teacher who could put that insight into some kind of perspective for me so that I actually came to feel that it was as special as I had come to feel it was.

If you don't get the answer you want from one of us, try another. That's why you have two teachers for your interviews.

It actually took my motivation a while to recover from that, because two things had happened. One is in touching this place of greater freedom, some of the reason I had for practicing went away. I'd actually reached one of the things I was looking for, was understanding freedom in a really deep way. And then the other thing that was discouraging was that it wasn't validated. So I was left with this not knowing or this level of confusion.

Sometimes when you reach that kind of next rung of contentment, don't be surprised if the motivation sort of falls off for a while. Don't beat yourself up or think you're doing something wrong. I think it's really natural, and I think it's a sign that maybe it's time to enjoy the fruits of your practice for a while. Enjoy the happiness and the spaciousness and the peacefulness that you've opened to. Really bask. Take some time to bask in the blessings that the practice has opened for you.

And then after a while of basking, after the confusion died down, I started to see, "Oh, you know what? There's a lot more contentment now. There's a lot more happiness and there's a lot more peacefulness and there's still suffering."

It didn't finish the job. So over time, even though that suffering was more subtle, I was more sensitive. And so it felt like it was chafing also, the new, more subtle kinds of unhappiness. And then that motivated me to go back and practice more.

Someone in the interview group today in talking about intention said something that really excited me. She said in the last retreat that she had been at, she had some real opening in the course of the retreat and went to her teacher and said, "I want to be free." Stated it really strongly for herself and out loud for her teacher: "I want to be free."

This can be another really beautiful turning point in motivation—when we realize that it's not really enough just to come out of some of our suffering, but we really want to find the way out of suffering altogether and not to stop until we find that limitless freedom that the Buddha talked about over and over again. This is a beautiful motivation because it's a very long, enduring one. It's one that can be with you for the rest of your life, the rest of your practice.

There's another shift in motivation that happens. You know, we talk a lot about this factor of selflessness or anatta, coming to see that there's no separate self, no abiding center within this mind-body process. At first it sounds kind of intellectual. It doesn't sound like it really means very much. But as we start to connect with it, it affects everything in our life and in our practice.

And one of the things that it starts to do is to take away the sense that I am different than you. If there's no abiding center here that's unique and there's no abiding center there that's unique, then what are we both? You and I are both this vast awareness that holds the body sensations and all the qualities of the human heart and all our thoughts as they go by and knows them all in a very deep way.

I was on a retreat actually where we were practicing this reflection about the liberation of all beings everywhere. And I came to see that that was really the logical outcome of seeing through the separate self. So my interest in practice made this little shift from just wanting to liberate the nature here, the Buddha nature here, to wanting to liberate the Buddha nature wherever it was being obscured.

So as we really sense that there's no separation between me and you, between each other, our sense of practice can become much, much wider. In the tradition, this is talked about as the broadening out of the great highway of practice, sometimes called the great vehicle of practice. And it becomes great because our scope of practice becomes limitless. Wherever there's obscuration to this Buddha nature, that's where the opportunity for practice and for liberation is.

As we take this as an actual interest of ours, we can begin to practice with it in a practice that's called bodhicitta. Bodhi means enlightened, citta means mind or heart. So literally this might mean enlightened heart, enlightened mind. But the way that I actually like to read it is the awakening heart. It's the motivation of the awakening heart that sees through all distinctions and sees through all separation to bring liberation everywhere for all beings.

If this touches you, if this speaks to you, even a little bit, you can start to bring this into your daily practice. The Dalai Lama has a very simple formulation of this wish for bodhicitta, this aspiration, in two lines. He says, "By the force of generosity and other virtues, may I achieve awakening to benefit all sentient beings."

By the force of generosity and other virtues—this is actually a code phrase for the paramis. It's considered that the paramis are the wholesome qualities within our heart that have the power to liberate the mind. Generosity is the first of the paramis. Other qualities are compassionate conduct, loving-kindness, equanimity, truthfulness, renunciation, determination, wisdom. So by the force of all these beautiful qualities, by developing them over our practice, may I achieve awakening to benefit all sentient beings. Because if we can awaken ourselves and come to that place of steadiness and unbounded compassion and unshakable fearlessness, that's really how we can best help others.

So for myself, when I sit, when I sit down, I do the three refuges. I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. And then I just recite this short verse on bodhicitta, on the awakening heart, which sets

my intention for the rest of the sitting. And I've been practicing that way for a number of years now. And I find what it does is that it always keeps my practice linking me to the rest of the world so that my practice doesn't become kind of self-enclosing and limiting.

You know, in making a statement like "I want to be free," it's a very brave thing to do. Often I feel in the West today in our practice, we've gotten a little afraid of stating clearly, "This is what I want from my practice. This is my goal. This is my aim, this is my destination, and I'm not going to stop until I reach it." I feel we've gotten a little shy about just saying that in a really straightforward way, probably because enough of us have been burned by taking up a goal and kind of striving after it without a great deal of wisdom. And so we've tended maybe to toss the goal out of our practice. But I feel that may be throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Because a goal can be a really beautiful and inspiring thing in practice. And I think what we need is the way to hold the goal in a mature way.

For me, it's a little bit like when I was a child and we were going on a long trip. We used to drive to my grandmother's in North Carolina. And I'd get in the car, and my father would be driving the car and we'd be about twenty miles down the road and I'd say, "Dad, are we there yet?" You know, and every couple hours I'd repeat the question. "Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" As a child, I couldn't hold that goal in an easy way. The goal itself kind of grated on me because I couldn't wait for it.

But for my father, holding the goal wasn't a problem. He knew what lay at the end of the road. And he knew that if he just drove this next mile, sooner or later we'd be there.

So as practitioners, can we hold our goal, our deepest intention, our deepest longing, with that kind of maturity? To recognize that it is the end of our path, and yet we don't have to rub it against our present moment experience and downgrade the moment by comparison. We can simply trust that, as Sylvia said, we don't need to go from here to there. All we need to go is from here to more and more fully here. And we understand the way that mindfulness works is that that coming home is what unfolds us toward that liberation, what unfolds us toward that goal.

And holding that goal somewhere in the back of our mind, we know that we don't stop our efforts. We don't let our motivation down until we've reached it.

The Buddha used an analogy. He said that one goes forth into the spiritual life and develops gain and honor and renown, becomes known and respected in the community for the depths of one's practice. And then one can become intoxicated and satisfied with that result and says that such a person can become negligent and then falls into suffering and stops short of the goal.

He said, "It's like someone who goes into the forest looking for the heartwood of a tree, wanting to build a solid house, and finds a great tree that has heartwood, but instead of taking the heartwood, just pulls off the twigs and the leaves of the tree, goes away and is satisfied."

He said, "But there's another kind of practitioner who isn't satisfied with the leaves and the twigs, isn't satisfied with honor and renown, instead develops virtue. But it's possible to stop short at virtue and become negligent and to fall into suffering." And then such a person, the Buddha said, is like one who has gone to the great tree and taken just the outer bark, thinking it was the heartwood.

But another person doesn't stop at the outer bark and instead develops the quality of concentration, of unification of mind, which brings not only happiness but great insight. And if one stops at the virtue of concentration, then the Buddha said it's like stopping at the inner bark of the tree, taking away the inner bark, thinking that it's the heartwood.

But other practitioners go beyond the inner bark and develop the quality of knowledge and vision of seeing things as they actually are. But then a person can stop short there. And then the Buddha said it's like taking the sapwood of that great tree.

But the last practitioner is not satisfied with the sapwood, continues and attains what the Buddha called perpetual liberation. And the Buddha said, "From this it is impossible to fall away."

And he concluded by saying that this holy life, friends, does not have gain, honor and renown for its benefit, or the attainment of virtue for its benefit, or the attainment of concentration for its benefit, or knowledge and vision for its benefit. But it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of the holy life, its heartwood and its end.

Let's sit for a minute together.

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