Purification of the Heart

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 50:10

The talk tonight is on the theme of the purification of the heart. I feel very privileged to be sharing this evening with you. This is the last night of the second millennium in Western countries. There was all the hoopla a year ago about the millennium, but as you know, that was the false dawn. This is the real thing, so it's a great way to start the third millennium in a dharma setting.

I couldn't help but reflect, though. I have a Buddhist calendar upstairs in my room, and the year on the calendar—it's from a group based in Thailand—is 2,544. That's the number of years since the Buddha was on the Earth. So if the millennium means anything, I reckon it means that the Thai people are about 544 years ahead of us in their wisdom and metta. We still have some ways to go yet. That's why the theme of the purification of heart seemed appropriate for tonight.

There was a cartoon from a magazine called Natural History, a science magazine. It showed a beach with a little fish with legs struggling out of the ocean, just coming up on the beach. There was a thought bubble above its head that said, "eat, survive, reproduce." A little further up on the beach was a full-fledged lizard that looked like a miniature dinosaur, walking quite happily on land. It had made the transition, and above its head was the thought bubble: "eat, survive, reproduce." A little further up was a monkey scampering along the beach quite happily on its four legs, and above its head, the same thought bubble: "eat, survive, reproduce."

Then there was a man standing on the beach dressed in 20th century garb. He had a very puzzled expression on his face, stroking his chin and looking very quizzical. The thought bubble above his head was: "Hmm, I wonder what life's all about. Eat, survive, reproduce."

If you look back over the history of human beings on this planet, or even the history of our own life, you could be forgiven for thinking that these are the primary urges and forces in the human psyche—the forces concerned with survival and all the fights for limited resources, for the conquest of land that can provide food, and all the energy that we've put as a species into sexuality and conquest in that direction too. This is not a very optimistic view of human nature, but from the history of humans on the planet, there's some reality to it.

The good news is that from the Buddhist perspective, our deepest nature is good. When we look most deeply inside each one of us, we find something that is pure from the beginning, pure now, and pure into the eternal future. Something that is basically uncorruptible. That is the center of each one of us.

The Buddha put it like this: "This mind is naturally radiant and brightly shining, but it is colored by the

defilements that visit it. This the untaught person does not understand, and so for them there is no cultivation of the mind."

This natural goodness that's within us has been covered by these other forces—these self-centered forces basically of desire and fear. The point the Buddha is making is that the radiance, the natural radiance of the mind and heart is intrinsic, is always there. But the things that cover it are only visitors. They're only temporary, so they're not intrinsic. Sometimes it's hard to connect with this innate goodness because the forces that cover it—hope and fear—are so strong.

Then the Buddha goes on: "This mind is naturally radiant and brightly shining, but it is free from the attachments that visit it. This the noble follower of the way understands as it really is. So for them, there is cultivation of this mind."

When we can perceive that intrinsic goodness free from the defilements, we realize that that's our human potential. Then we become inspired to live more and more from that center. The cultivation is the work of gaining access to that intrinsic goodness again and again and again so that it becomes a more stable place from which we can live our lives.

The purpose of meditation then can be seen as the thinning of these veils that cover that goodness within each of us—the lifting of the visitors that keep us from seeing that innate purity.

It's from the Dhammapada. He said, "Help others if you can. Don't harm living beings and purify the heart. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas."

Of course, he didn't say "heart." He was speaking in the Pali language, and the word he used was *citta*, which can be translated either as heart or mind. It's a word that in Pali and Sanskrit includes our whole emotional life as well as our rational mental life. So the purification of *citta* really means two levels: purification on the emotional level—what we call the heart level or feeling level—and purification of how we understand the world, the purification of view, or purification by wisdom.

Tonight I'd like to talk more about the emotional side of that purification work and focus on the purification of the heart. In the purification of the heart, which is really what brought me to meditation practice, our work is about healing. It's about healing our emotional life and the struggles and conflicts and difficulties that we encounter by not quite understanding how to work with the painful emotions we face in living.

If you look at a child, children go through every emotion on the map. They go into them totally, experience them totally, express them totally—much to their parents' and teachers' concern often. But then they'll come right out of that emotion into the next one. So whether it's happiness or terror or anger or joy, the child is into each one fully, and when they leave it, it's gone. It's just over.

But somehow for us, we've lost that ability to go into an emotion fully with great trust and faith and then

leave it fully when it's passed. So the healing work is really about restoring that childlike innocence and openness to the whole range of our human emotional life.

The foundation of this work is the trust, the faith that we don't have to get rid of any of these emotions. In order to heal, in order to find a harmony within ourselves, we don't have to get rid of the emotions. Now in the Buddhist path, in the long run, these obscurations, these difficult emotions are said to lift completely. In the mind of the Buddha it's said that greed and hatred and all their forms were no longer operative, were no longer even dormant. That's a beautiful possibility, an inspiring possibility.

But in order to heal, to find that emotional balance and harmony, that level of understanding is not needed. We can come to a great sense of well-being and joy and happiness in life without going that far. So for the work of healing, the purification of the heart in terms of the emotional life, there's no need to get rid of any of the emotions that we experience. The need is to understand them better. Seeing with wisdom the way they really are is all that's needed to purify them. And then we can have that ability that the child has to go into the emotion fully, trust it, and when it goes, to come out.

We recognize in starting this emotional work that we're all human and we all share the same package of emotions. In many ways we're the same organism, each one of us. We've been put together just the same and there are just these minor variations—how far our eyes are apart and what color our hair is and what color our skin is. But basically within each of us we know joy, we know happiness, we know enthusiasm, we know excitement, we know friendship, we know delight. We also know the difficult side. We know fear and sorrow and grief, despair and loneliness. We all have all these within us, and in our meditation practice they will all come to be experienced. The whole range of our human possibilities will visit us in our practice. And it's really just a question of coming to know each one of the visitors, coming to understand it, not about getting rid of any of them.

Robert Aitken put this in a rather dramatic fashion. One time he was leading a retreat—he's a great Zen teacher, a Western Zen teacher who lives on Oahu. He's mostly retired, but in my view he's one of the greatest Western Dharma teachers alive. He came in for a Dharma talk at his Zen retreat and he sat down and said, "The difficulties you're experiencing now..."

Then he went into a long pause. He had everybody's attention. This was the phrase that rang home for people in the middle of a Zen retreat like ours. And after the pause he continued, "...will be with you for a very long time."

Whoa. Is this man bringing good news or what?

So it sounds discouraging when he says it like that, but the actual meaning is very liberating when you think about it. It means we don't have to change anything about the way we are. We don't have to change ourselves in this practice. It's more a question of opening with full acceptance to what we are here and now, not getting rid of or changing any part of ourselves.

Strong emotions really aren't a problem unless we make them one. The life of a child, the emotional life of the child, really illustrates this. If we can let emotions come, express themselves, and go, where's the problem? But the problem comes when part of our emotional life isn't comfortable for us. If we don't feel it's acceptable, if we don't feel it's okay, if we don't feel we can allow it to be in us, then when it comes, we want to close down around it. We constrict, we contract with fear and non-acceptance. Then it gets bottled up.

The emotion gets repressed, and when we repress an experience or emotion in the psyche, it goes deep and doesn't get released. This is basically what's happened to most of us somewhere along our growing up—somewhere in adolescence, probably. We started finding feelings we couldn't move through easily. The outside culture, teen culture, told us we weren't cool if we felt that way. Or our parents told us we shouldn't be feeling that way. Or we were just too apprehensive. So we closed down around some of our emotional life.

It's actually beautiful in the retreat setting, in meditation practice, when some of the richness of that emotional life starts to come back for us. Not always so easy, but it's a very enlivening and opening part of the process.

The first step in purification is to know what we're feeling when we're feeling it. This is much harder than it sounds. It sounds straightforward, but it's not.

I think about a time I walked out of this meditation hall, sitting a retreat here, and I was going to my walking spot. I tended to walk down on the grass below the parking lot. I was heading out for my usual walking spot, being quite mindful—lifting, moving, placing. Slowed down. I'd been in retreat for a while. Lifting, moving, placing. I was very, very present.

I looked up toward my walking path, and there was somebody in it. Somebody was walking in my path. Lifting, moving, placing. Very mindful again. What's that person doing in my path? I've been walking there for a week already. Don't they know I'm there? Lifting, moving, placing. What kind of person would do something like that? They must not be very developed. Lifting, moving, placing.

So I walked down and got another place on the grass. It was actually just as good, but that didn't really matter. Lifting, moving, placing, and I was still annoyed. I'd still think about what was wrong with that person. Lifting, moving, placing.

About halfway through my walking period, I realized: I'm annoyed. I thought I was being so mindful, and all this time I was annoyed and I didn't even see it. So then I went, "Oh, annoyed, annoyed. Irritation, irritation." I'd been feeling it for about half an hour and hadn't even known it.

That's the sneaky thing about these states of mind—they kind of zip in under our radar. We've got the mindfulness radar set up. We're catching breaths, we're catching sensations, we're catching sounds. And then zoom, these mind states come in.

It eludes all our radar and takes us over. While we're in the grip of it, we're really caught by it, bound by it. There's no space. We're so identified—in my case, I was so identified with being annoyed, I couldn't see anything else.

When that annoyance is in place, or the other states, they act like a color, like a screen over our eyes. We see everything in the world through that kind of color. Everything that happens when you're feeling annoyed isn't quite satisfying, isn't quite right.

The first thing—the most important thing and about half the battle—is to be able to name the feeling. Just to be able to say, "Oh, I'm feeling angry," or "I'm feeling afraid," or "I'm feeling hurt," or "I'm feeling anxious," or "I'm feeling desire." Whatever the thing is, if you can name it, that's half the battle.

What the naming does—and I actually encourage you to use the note at that point, just that soft note: "anger, anger," "wanting, wanting"—that soft note seems to create a kind of spaciousness around the feeling. It lets us know we're not just anger. We're not just desire. We're not just fear. We're also mindfulness. We're also awareness.

When we recognize that that awareness is there, it gives us a lot of choice in relation to the feeling. We don't feel like we're just under its power or that it's taken us over. What we do at that point is start to create a relationship with it, a relationship that's based on understanding, observation, mindfulness, and wisdom.

It's really the setting up of that relationship that alters the power these states have over us. It gives us a new place to come from in relation to them. Even though the state may still be there—I may still be feeling annoyed or fearful or wanting—we have a new degree of choice in the situation. We're not quite as controlled by it. That means a little bit of the power has gone out of this state, this strong emotion.

The next step is just let yourself feel that state directly. Give yourself over to feeling the emotion once you've named it. There's really nothing else that you need to do with it. You don't have to wonder about where it came from. Was it related to your childhood upbringing? Is this here because of something your father said to you thirty-five years ago? You don't have to figure out the source, because this practice is all about here and now.

All you have to do is bring that here-and-now attention to the experience of that feeling. That's where the freedom will come in.

Emotions generally have three areas where they really impact us. The first—I think Sharda mentioned this this morning—is in the body. Any strong emotion will have a resonance, an impact somewhere in the body. If you tune into the sensations where you feel the emotion impacting you, that's a good way to stay grounded and in touch with the feeling.

The second is the mental tone itself, the coloring in the mind of that mood. Every emotion has its own

flavor, its own color in the mind. That's a mental attribute, not particularly of the body. So tune into that—the flavor of anger, the flavor of fear, the flavor of wanting.

The third is that each emotion has its own storyline. It's strongly connected with thought. Thoughts can bring up these emotions, and when we're in the emotion we tend to think a certain pattern of thought. Those kinds of thoughts we call the storyline, and I'll talk about those in a little more detail.

If you are aware of the impact in the body, the mental color of the emotion, and the kind of thoughts that go with it, then you have the whole constellation of that emotion. Mindfulness of emotions is about letting yourself feel all three of these aspects.

When the Buddha talked about the difficulties that come for meditators, he talked about a list called the five hindrances. Many of you are familiar with this list, have heard it lots of times.

Usually when we announce the five hindrances, half the room goes to sleep. You could probably give this talk as well as any of us, so I'm not going to give that talk tonight. But just to remind the veterans here, the five hindrances are sense desire, aversion or negativity, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt.

I'm going to do a little bit different list tonight—what I see as the meditator's big five. These are five hits that tend to play over and over for myself and a lot of the people that I meet. In no particular order, the big five that I see are desire, anger, self-judgment, sadness, and fear. These are five that it's very helpful to get some experience working with in practice.

Actually, if they visit you during the retreat, you're very fortunate. Because in the retreat you don't have anything else to do but learn about these. If you're in the outside world, you're going to get distracted. "Oh, I can't pay attention to my sadness right now. I've got to go do my job. I've got to do my work. I've got to take care of my children. I've got to relate with my partner. Got to drive to the store." We rarely get that opportunity to just come into intimate touch with these forces that are so strong and so central in our lives.

In a retreat we don't have anything else to do but give ourselves totally to that relationship. We can get to know them really, really closely. This is very healing—this kind of intimate knowledge. Very healing in the emotional life because as we understand our emotions we take the unknown quality out. We take that scary quality out of them.

So we'll see how far we get with the big five. We'll probably only do two or three tonight. But they're very typical. Once you've learned how to work with one, the ways to work with the others become easier.

I'll first talk a little about desire. Very central in the Buddha's teaching, obviously. The second noble truth was the truth that the cause of suffering is craving. So this force of desire is really central in the connection to unhappiness in life. It's this basic movement of mind that wants a pleasant experience. And it can be very strong and captivating in the middle of a retreat because our retreat experience is often

devoid of pleasant experiences. So the austerity highlights pleasure by contrast.

I was teaching a retreat in Italy this summer, and a fellow came in for an interview on about the second or third day. He said, "Well, I'm having a little trouble settling down into the retreat." I said, "Oh really, why is that?" He said, "Well, I'm on my vacation. And I had two choices. A few of my friends were going on a vacation in the Caribbean and they invited me to go along. And my other choice was to come here." I said, "Well, it's great you came here. What made you choose that?" He said, "I couldn't get a ticket to the Caribbean."

So of course, that really made me feel wanted! But I understood why he was having a hard time settling down. He hadn't given up the Caribbean trip yet. So I said, "Look, just hang out with it for a few more days. Keep coming back to the present. Remember what it was that you valued about your meditation practice. Give yourself some encouragement and see if you land on earth soon."

And he did. Next couple of days I saw him, he'd kind of gotten over it and his practice unfolded really beautifully after that. But take a look at the storyline—the thoughts around that experience for him. The storyline was basically if he'd been in the Caribbean, he would have been happy. There may have been some truth to that.

But of course, as we all know, it's just a very limited and inferior kind of happiness. We really wouldn't wish that on a good friend. But when the mind becomes convinced that "if I had that, I would be happy," then the storyline catches us up in a state of unfulfillment. Because along with that goes the corollary: "I can't be happy now. I can't be happy until I have that. So I'm unhappy now." And that's what he was suffering with—he was actually miserable at the time.

This is the way that desire tends to work. We see an object, a thing, a person, a place, and we project that as something that we want. The storyline, the underlying assumption is: "If I had it, I would be happy." Now to some extent that can be true—these external pleasures do bring a kind of happiness for a while. There's no denying that.

But what the projection into the future doesn't ever take into account is that vacation being over, that dish of ice cream being eaten, that relationship finishing the honeymoon phase and going into—what was it Jack said—"the laundry after the ecstasy" phase of relationship. Somehow the desire storyline never looks at the ending of the pleasurable experience. It never looks beyond the limited satisfaction.

Once we look beyond that into impermanence, we see we're just going to be back in the same place we were before. And so what have we really gained by that temporary satisfaction? Ultimately, nothing. But desire doesn't want to see that. It just wants to see the temporary satisfaction.

Dharma teaching turns the whole thing around. Instead of saying, "I'm unhappy because I don't have the object," the teaching, the impact of the second noble truth is: "I'm suffering because of the presence of this desire force." The desire force itself brings an unsatisfying feeling, brings a feeling of unfulfillment, of

lack, of inadequacy.

When we tune in to the actual experience of the desire, we realize that in itself, that's suffering. And that's what the attention to desire needs to see—that the wanting itself hurts. It doesn't satisfy.

Now in addition to things in outside life that we wish we could experience, there are lots of things in the retreat setting that we want. We want our body to be comfortable. I spent many years on the cushion, actually in this very hall—because this is where I did a lot of my early practice—trying to make my body comfortable through manipulating the energy inwardly. I'm sure some of you who've been doing this for a while have learned a lot of those tricks.

If you flood an area with awareness, it tends to soften up the solidity of that area. You can soften up knots that way, by being there with a gentle attention again and again and again. You can soften some of the pain that way. So I would soften up one area. That would take me a few sittings. Then I'd notice that the tension had gone somewhere else. So I'd go soften up that area for a while. I'd get that soft and then I'd notice that another part was constricted. So I'd go soften that up. Then I'd get my whole body clear and I'd think, "Now I can meditate."

That would last for about half a sitting. Then my body would go into a huge overall contraction, and I'd start all over. So about one half of a sitting every other day I would have a good time, and the rest of the time I was struggling, struggling, struggling.

I would have been much better off, I would have been much smarter if I'd realized: "You're in discomfort. You're going to have some discomfort. You can bear it. Work with equanimity. Work with accepting this physical discomfort and let your mind settle." If I had let my mind settle, I would have gone much deeper in my practice much more quickly.

This is actually a wholesome approach to working with physical discomfort. Find that we can tolerate it to a certain degree. Don't try to make it go away—it's really pretty much a wasted effort, unless you can adjust the posture slightly in a skillful way. But find that increasing ability to be with the physical pain, and then this wanting, this kind of endless rat race of wanting can die off.

The other thing that we often want is to re-experience a pleasurable sitting or walking meditation. We'll have a really great sitting, and then the next time we come into the hall, we're eager to have that sitting again. We want to get back in the hall, but it doesn't happen. And then we want it to happen. So we find ourselves in the position of trying to make it happen or straining for it. And then we start wondering why our mind is scattered, why we can't rest effortlessly in the present the way we did the last sitting. It's because the desire force has kicked up. We want that back.

I start to look within myself when I'm beginning to recognize that feeling of meditative striving, straining to recapture something. It almost feels like I'm being pulled out of myself, leaning forward. I'm reaching out for something that's not here, and my being feels split. It's the exact opposite of the relaxation that

we've talked about so much—where we just come and settle so easily into the present moment as it is.

So start to look for that in your practice. That feeling of leaning forward to grab something, and the contrast of just settling into how the moment is.

Another of the big five hindrances is anger, or we could say negativity, or we could say aversion. It's a feeling of being dissatisfied with the situation, mostly with the externals of a situation. We tend to put the blame, put the fault on something outside ourselves. We go through the lunch line and see someone who took too much food, and that's irritating. Or someone's making too much noise in the hall, or someone took a shower outside the shower hours and we couldn't sleep, or the weather is depressing and that's not right for us. And then we get into this unpleasant, negative, critical frame of mind and we think that it's caused by the outside.

The Buddha told a story to his monks about a jackal that illustrated this kind of tendency of mind. He said, "Monks, did you see that jackal that was around the edge of the forest this morning? It stood for a while and then it ran into the underbrush and then it ran out again. Then it ran into a tree hollow and then it ran out again. Then it ran into a cave and it ran out again. It wasn't comfortable standing, it wasn't comfortable in the underbrush, it wasn't comfortable in the tree, it wasn't comfortable in the cave. It blamed its unhappiness on the ground, it blamed its unhappiness on the underbrush, it blamed its unhappiness on the tree, and it blamed its unhappiness on the cave. But the problem, monks, was with none of these." He said that jackal had mange. The problem was the mange. That jackal wasn't going to be happy wherever it sat.

When aversion gets established in our minds, it's like the mange. Nothing is going to satisfy. And we think that the problem is the weather, the food, the person sitting next to us—whatever the external looks like. The problem is the aversion itself. The state of mind that's always critical, where nothing's quite right.

So again, the storyline with aversion or anger is that the fault is out there. But if we look more closely at the actual experience of the aversion, we can feel that it feels tight. It feels constricting. It feels burning. And when we feel that again, we can see the suffering that we bring to ourselves in holding on to that negativity. If we can let go of the storyline that blames it on the outside, the feeling will go in its own time. We don't have to make it go. It will lift.

The third one I want to mention is the area of self-judgment, where we turn this negativity toward ourselves. And it leaves us feeling that we're not good enough, that we're not fully human, that something is wrong inside of us. Something has fundamentally gone off in us, and so we're not really worthy to be a full human being. This sense of not being worthwhile or worthlessness seems almost like an epidemic in the West today. So many people have this feeling.

There's a group of Western teachers who were meeting with the Dalai Lama some years ago in Dharamsala, and they told the Dalai Lama about this problem and asked him how to work with it, how to

address it. The Dalai Lama said, "What do you mean?" He didn't know what they were talking about. He couldn't relate to it. He said, "In Tibet, children are really valued, loved, and they're shown that kind of love from the time they're really young." And he went around and asked each teacher, "Do you know what this feels like? Can you relate to this?"

And every teacher there said, yeah, I got it.

So the Dalai Lama himself seems entirely free of this feeling. He's a beautiful inspiration. He came to Spirit Rock this year. We had a conference of Western teachers that we were at, and he was with us for a day and a half. He was talking about how he views himself and how other people view him. And talk about someone who's exposed to praise and blame.

The Dalai Lama said, "You know, some people call me the God King." I didn't know that he actually knew people called him that, but it's true. And he said, "Other people call me the living Buddha." He said, "No, no, no, I am not. I am not. I am just a simple Buddhist monk. That is all." He said, "But other people, they call me a wolf in monk's clothing." I've read that statement myself. "Or," he said, "they call me a counter-revolutionary. That's what they see." He said, "But I don't care. I just don't care. I look at my own intention. If my intention is good, then I trust in that. What somebody else sees, that's their problem. I look at my own intention."

So he has this tremendous self-confidence and at the same time an openness to whatever somebody else's point of view is. For me it was really inspiring—one of the most beautiful moments of the conference—that inner strength that he has in the middle of this huge responsibility, bearing the weight of the Tibetan people on his shoulders.

So this sense of worthlessness is one that we can actually experience also in our meditation. When it comes, again, if we can separate out the storyline from the actual feeling, the feeling can be touched directly. The feeling of inadequacy, of not being good enough, of some degree of shame or embarrassment about who we are. But then there's a storyline also that goes with it: "People don't love me. People don't care for me. People don't express their affection. Nobody cares about me."

If we can learn to let go of those thoughts or even question those thoughts—because mostly they're not true—just abide with the feeling. See if we can open ourselves up and bear the feeling, accept the feeling. We can find our way through that kind of inner conflict.

I had a friend when I was in the robes who was another Western monk, a man with a lot of metta, a lot of heart, very warm and a well-loved person. And as I got to know him, he told me that he had spent the first nine years that he was in robes working through his self-hatred. It was incredible to me because I didn't detect any of it from him. But that had been his work for the first years of his practice. He had really worked through it, and it was very inspiring to see. He was full of warmth and love.

So with all these states, what transforms us in relation to them? Where's the transformation coming from?

The beautiful thing is that all these states are workable. They all can be understood through our practice. They all can be accommodated within our hearts. And as our hearts get bigger, we can hold them more and more from a place of compassion. There's nothing in us that we can't open to and accept.

It's not easy and it won't happen the first time that we run into one of these states, or even the second time or the third time. But we meet them over and over again, keep trying to open a little further each time, and over time we really find that we're able to accept them.

I went through a huge change in my relation to fear through the course of practice. I spent many, many hours being afraid of my fear.

not being able to accept it, feeling that it shouldn't be there, feeling that it was going to really destroy me or damage me. But as I opened to it little by little, I came to the place where whether that fear arose or didn't arise, I really didn't care. It was easy either way. And that kind of acceptance really is possible for us.

When I came to that level of acceptance about fear, I really felt like it wasn't a problem anymore. Now I've gone in and out of that level of acceptance since, but I've touched that level many times. So any of these states can be seen and related to in that way. If we can accept them fully, they're really not a problem and they lose their power over us.

The key thing is being able to feel them directly. And for that, the more you can generate an attitude of interest, curiosity, investigation, and really wanting to understand—that will support the opening. They're really just forms of energy. Until we invest in them, they're not a problem.

Can we see them with mindfulness? Mindfulness being not just a cold sort of clinical look under a microscope, but mindfulness being a quality that has a lot of friendliness in it, a real accepting kind of attention. Can we see fear or desire or anger or sadness with a really friendly kind of attention?

If we can, this is really a miracle of practice because what we're doing is a very profound thing in that moment. We're taking a moment that to our ordinary mind would just be full of negativity, full of this difficult emotional state. And we're starting to suffuse it then with the qualities of mindfulness. And that means the qualities of attention, of friendliness, of wisdom, of patience, of compassion, of openness.

What that means is that we're actually giving birth in that moment to the awakened heart. Right in the middle of our most difficult experiences, we're bringing forth from ourselves our deepest nature, our truest nature, this inherent good that we talked about earlier.

A moment of anguish and difficulty is being transformed into a moment of openness, awareness, wisdom and compassion. This really is the alchemy of our practice. There's no technique that can do this. This kind of bringing forth doesn't come out of a meditative technique. It has to come from your heart and it has to come fresh every time. It's not a recipe and it's not a formula.

But the more we're able to do it, the easier it becomes to bring that kind of awakened heart out in the middle of any situation, of any circumstance that we find ourselves in. This is what transforms us, this bringing forth of that beautiful heart moment after moment.

One of my teachers, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, a young Tibetan Lama, said to me, "The sacred point of our practice is the liberation of confusions." That's what is sacred that we're doing.

I'd like to close with a quotation from Gampopa, who was a disciple of Milarepa, the great Tibetan saint from the 11th century. This is put in the form of a prayer or supplication. Who it's directed toward isn't entirely clear. It could be toward anyone—toward the divine, toward a teacher, toward a lineage master, toward the great mystery.

This is called "The Four Blessings of Gampopa":

Grant your blessing so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessing so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessing so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

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