The Eight Worldly Conditions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 57:56

Somebody asked in an interview the other day what I thought was a really great question: why is it so hard to stay present in daily life?

We looked at it and discussed it, exploring several different reasons. First, we simply don't have the habit of being present. To a certain extent, it's just a habit that we can develop—being here more often. It's really why retreats are so powerful. We generate that habit again and again and again. In daily life, we get quite busy. Thoughts and emotions get active, stirred up, and carry us away. It's hard to focus on the present because the thoughts are quite active.

But then another aspect of daily life is that we're involved in things that we care about, and we get subject to a lot of ups and downs because of those things we care about—our work situation, our relationships with coworkers, whether a project is coming together, whether our kids are home at the time they said they were going to be, whether our partner is upset with us because we forgot to do something that particular day. We meet a lot of changing conditions in our daily life.

In a way, you could say that as laypeople there's an inherent tension with dharma practice. I think it exists with monastics too, but for laypeople it's even more exaggerated. We have to sustain two tracks of intention in our daily life.

One is that we have to take care of ourselves and our families. This is part of the metta phrases—the fourth phrase that says something like, "May I care for myself happily in this world." It really refers to our outer life: our livelihood, our relationships with partners, with children, with parents, with friends. May all that go smoothly and easily. As you know, that's kind of a full-time job all in itself. Sometimes being a worker, a partner, and a parent is more than a full-time job—much more.

And then, in addition, we're supposed to sustain this intention of dharma practice—coming back to the moment, nourishing mindfulness, and developing metta. And you've also found that that's a full-time job. So it's as though going back into the world, we're assigned two full-time jobs, at least. If you're a parent, maybe three.

How do we do this? The good news is that over time it gets easier. It gets easier to combine those intentions of paying attention with the intention of carrying out our activities in the world.

But there's also a built-in pitfall: the worldly activities themselves can be so involving and consuming that we lose track of the spiritual orientation. This easily happens in outer life. Not only are the daily activities consuming, but they're also really seductive. They offer so many intriguing possibilities, don't they? All the

interesting jobs there are to do, all the different projects we could get involved with as volunteers, all the different people we could meet, ways we could take our work into new areas, different activities we could do with our kids and partners, richness we could bring to our parents in their older years. There are so many rich possibilities and ways to spend our time in the outer world.

We can see as we get back into it that the forces of wanting, of desire, can lead us down a lot of these different tracks. It really is easy to forget to keep bringing in the spiritual focus, to keep coming back to awareness as a refuge, to metta as a direction and compassion. So it's actually quite easy, I think, to go back into the world and get lost in the pursuits of our daily life.

One reason is that the desires in outer life are so manifold and so compelling that we may lose our sense of spiritual purpose. We may lose an orientation or a direction.

This is a quote from Tony Parsons. He's the new competitor to Eckhart Tolle in the Western self-realized category, which you may have discovered is a blooming category these days. All these masters are coming along who've never had any spiritual teacher but blossom spontaneously. Eckhart Tolle is one, and Franz just turned me on to Tony Parsons, who's a British guy born in 1933. He had a spontaneous awakening when he was twenty years old and has now been teaching for the last few years.

This is a quote from Tony Parsons: "Whatever I seek or think that I want, all of my desires are only a reflection of my longing to come home. Home is my original nature. It is right here, simply in what is."

I'll read something from Eckhart Tolle's book The Power of Now that says something similar. For those who don't know him, Eckhart Tolle is now fifty-three and had a spontaneous awakening at age twenty-nine. He's German-born but lives in Canada and is now teaching quite a bit in the States.

"All negative emotions are modifications of one primordial, undifferentiated emotion that has its origin in the loss of awareness of who we are beyond name and form."

I'll read that again because it's quite dense. All negative emotions are modifications of one primordial, undifferentiated emotion that has its origin in the loss of awareness of who we really are beyond name and form.

What both these comments are pointing to is that we've lost touch with our true nature. You could call it awareness, you could call it emptiness, you could call it presence or being or God, if that language speaks to you. Having lost touch with this nature in this kind of fall from grace, there's a deep sense of disappointment, of frustration, of abandonment, of incompleteness that befalls us sentient beings separated from our Source.

Because this sense of disappointment and loss is so burdensome, we escape from feeling it through all the outer activities of our lives. The spiritual path begins when we start drawing back that outer-directed energy and realizing that the only thing that will truly satisfy us is returning to the source, returning to

our true nature, our true home.

We're conditioned by society to look in worldly directions for happiness and satisfaction, but the message of the spiritual path is that these directions are actually misleading, taking us away from what will truly heal and bring us genuine happiness and satisfaction when we put our real emphasis and intent there.

One of the best descriptions of the ways our life can go off on worldly tracks is found in a sutta from the Anguttara Nikaya titled "The Vicissitudes of Life." This gives us the title for our talk this evening: "The Eight Worldly Conditions."

The Buddha speaks: "These eight worldly conditions, O monks, keep the world turning around, and the world turns around these eight worldly conditions. What eight? Gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure."

The Buddha teaches that these eight conditions are something we're all subject to, and what's particularly striking is that they're all impermanent, always changing. We can never land forever in any one of them, neither the positive nor the negative sides. We continue to be exposed to their alternation.

If our attempt in life is to find happiness by landing in one of the positive states—gain, praise, pleasure, or success—and to always keep away from experiencing the negative states of loss, blame, pain, and failure, we simply can't do it. It's not possible because the conditions of the world are such that these will always be alternating.

As practitioners, our understanding and direction should be that we can't escape these changing conditions of life, but we may be able to find a kind of equanimity amidst them. Rather than pinning our hopes on always being on the positive side—which doesn't happen for anyone—we can find a way, a place within ourselves, a strength of character and understanding to move more and more easily through the fluctuations of the ups and downs.

Let me explore these four pairs and how they impact our lives. The first pair the Buddha mentioned is gain and loss. It's fascinating to live at this time in 2001 with the phenomenon of gain and loss, because our society is so affluent. Here in the Bay Area, the impact of the computer industry is so significant that stories of gain and loss are everywhere around us.

I mentioned earlier that I used to work at Microsoft, joining the company in 1988. The man who hired me was a wonderful manager—I loved working for him. He was very supportive and skilled, and I thought he was excellent at his job. I discovered after a while that he had been given stock options when he joined the company: 10,000 shares.

Those 10,000 shares of Microsoft in 1988 weren't worth much at the time. But over the following thirteen years, the stock split by a factor of 72. Those shares would today represent 720,000 shares of Microsoft stock, which even after the market's decline, is still worth considerable money.

In early 1989, my boss was passed over for a promotion. The position was given to someone he didn't respect, another manager he considered incompetent, and he was told he would have to report to this person. This really upset him. He felt mistreated, unacknowledged, disrespected. After a conflict with his new manager, one Friday afternoon he wrote a resignation letter and walked out of the office, leaving behind his 10,000 options.

Monday morning, he called his manager to apologize and tried to withdraw his resignation, but it wasn't accepted. The manager said, "No, I accepted your resignation. You're terminated from the company." With that one fit of temper, he essentially left behind about $40 million.

Then, in this past year, the Internet boom has gone bust.

And then the next sitting, the mind is scattered and restless, and there can be a real sense of loss. "Oh no, I've lost my concentration. Where did it go? I had it just an hour ago, and now it's gone." This attachment to meditative states can create the same kind of suffering as attachment to material gains and losses.

In meditation, we can practice this very teaching of the Buddha by recognizing when we're getting elated about a good sitting or dejected about a difficult one. We can reflect that this too is impermanent, bound up with suffering, and subject to change. The concentrated mind will pass. The scattered mind will also pass. Neither state defines our practice or our worth as practitioners.

I remember when I was on my first long retreat, I had what felt like a breakthrough sitting. The mind became very still, and there was a profound sense of peace. I was so excited about this gain that I spent the next several sittings trying to recreate that experience. Of course, the more I grasped for it, the more elusive it became. I was caught in exactly what the Buddha was describing—letting my mind become engrossed in the gain, and then suffering when I couldn't maintain it.

The practice becomes much more peaceful when we can approach each sitting with fresh eyes, not carrying the burden of our previous experiences, whether they were wonderful or terrible. We sit down with whatever mind we have right now, work with whatever arises, and don't get caught in comparing this sitting to yesterday's sitting or hoping for tomorrow's sitting to be different.

This teaching applies equally to our daily life practice. When mindfulness is strong during the day, when we catch ourselves getting angry and are able to step back, when we respond with kindness instead of reactivity—there can be a sense of spiritual gain. "I'm really getting good at this dharma thing." And then the next day, we explode at our partner over something trivial, we spend the whole day caught in worry, we act in ways that we know cause suffering. The sense of spiritual loss can be devastating.

But here too, the Buddha's instruction applies. The mindful day is impermanent. The unmindful day is also impermanent. Neither defines who we are or determines our capacity for awakening. They're all just changing conditions to be met with equanimity.

This doesn't mean we become passive or indifferent. We still make effort in our practice, we still care about our actions and their consequences. But we hold it all more lightly, with less attachment to outcomes, with more acceptance of the natural fluctuations that are part of any genuine spiritual path.

But concentration is one of the really variable factors in meditation practice, as you probably have noticed. It comes together, it grows strong, and you can do absolutely nothing wrong. You can be doing your practice fully and carefully, yet the concentration just decays. It's one of those factors that's really out of our control.

Again, when it goes, we may get unhappy and think, "Oh, I've blown it." But it's just the natural decaying of the factor of concentration. As we continue with a steady application of mindfulness, it will build back up. So concentration really manifests through the retreat in these cycles of gain and loss, and so do the experiences of calm.

Mindfulness tends to be much steadier in development. Mindfulness—being the capacity of the mind to know its experience—seems to grow little by little, but more steadily through our practice. The kind of gain in mindfulness that you develop over a retreat doesn't entirely desert you when you leave. I think it's one of the things that carries over most powerfully. The concentration will probably go, sorry to say. Most of you know that's going to disappear fairly soon. But the mindfulness is much more steady.

The second of the pairs is praise and blame. I used to think that once one reached a certain level of togetherness, integration in one's life, one was somehow free from blame. But the Buddha actually said somewhere in the suttas that there's no one who is not subject to blame. Looking back on his own life after his awakening, he got this in spades.

You'd think that somebody whose heart was kind and whose actions were thoughtful might possibly be exempt, but it wasn't the case. He went places where people were jealous of him. Teachers in different schools were threatened by him. People spread lies about him, defamed him, tried to keep him from being respected or cared for in different places that he went.

There's a very interesting story about one of his bhikkhus, a bhikkhu named Puna. Puna had come from a land on the west coast of India, and he wanted to go back to that land in order to practice. He didn't like the area where the Buddha was teaching, so he wanted to return to the west coast, to this land called Suna Paranta.

The Buddha said, "But Puna, the people of Suna Paranta are wild and rough. If they abuse and revile you, what will you think about that?" In other words, if you come upon this kind of blame in this land of wild and rough people, what are you going to do about it?

Puna replied, "Venerable sir, if the people of Suna Paranta abuse and revile me, then I will think: these people are excellent, truly excellent, in that they do not give me a blow with the fist."

The Buddha says, "But Puna, what if they do give you a blow with a fist? What will you think about that?"

"Oh, well, if they give me a blow with a fist, then I will think: these people are excellent, truly excellent, in that they do not give me a blow with a clod."

Of course the Buddha replies, "But what if they do give you a blow with a clod?"

Puna replies, "Well, then I will think: these people are excellent, truly excellent, in that they do not stab me with a knife."

"Well, what if they do stab you with a knife?"

"Well, then I will think: these people are excellent, truly excellent, in that they do not take my life with a sharp knife."

This is equanimity. This is being strong in the face of praise and blame.

We have a kind of modern-day example in the figure of Bill Clinton. He's somebody who I think could say something like that and kind of mean it. I don't know if you saw this news item—I think it came before the retreat started. He was at a meeting in Europe, and a protester who was concerned about globalization threw an egg at him. Clinton said, "Young people ought to get angry. They should have somebody to get angry at." Equanimity.

Praise and blame is also kind of an integral part of dharma teaching. It keeps the job juicy, so it always provides interest. If somebody comes up to me after a dharma talk and says, "Can I give you some feedback?" then I know I'm in trouble.

One of the interesting stages here at Spirit Rock is the Monday night class that Jack Kornfield leads. Probably a lot of you have seen that and may have come into Spirit Rock through that class. Teaching up here is like a heaven realm because you all have so much commitment and dedication to the practice.

You're really a wonderful group to work with. The Monday night people are often new to Spirit Rock, new to spiritual practice, and don't have the kind of commitment that people on eight-day retreats always have. There are many committed people in the Monday night group, but it's also where newcomers first encounter Spirit Rock. People come from all sorts of backgrounds, and you do meet some interesting characters on Monday nights.

I actually took over Monday night for about six months a few years ago when Jack was away. I was a fairly green dharma teacher at the time, and looking back I wonder how I ever had the nerve to do that. It was like being president of the Jack Kornfield fan club when Jack Kornfield was away. I did learn a lot from the experience.

I kept Jack's schedule: we sit, then we have a break, then a talk, followed by questions. So we reached the break after sitting for about forty-five minutes. I announced the break and immediately started going

through my papers to prepare my talk. There were about two hundred people there that night, and I was still pretty nervous, being fairly new to that scene.

This guy comes up to me and says, "I'm really angry. I'm really angry about the way you manage the time here. Would you like me to go into it now with you, or shall I write you a letter?"

I looked at the two hundred people, looked at my notes, and said, "Why don't you write me a letter?"

He said, "Okay," and started to walk away. Then he turned around and said, "But if you don't answer it, I'm going to be really angry."

I was glad he didn't stab me with a sharp knife.

In my early years, I really resisted that part of dharma teaching. I didn't want those experiences. I thought I shouldn't have to endure them. But I've actually changed my view on this, and Ajahn Sumedho has been helpful to me in this regard.

As a young monk—I mentioned he's been in robes for thirty-five years—when he was young he took to the practice easily and was very happy and contented on his own. He spent years with Ajahn Chah, and what he really wanted was to go off to the forest and just meditate. He wanted to find a peaceful place, live in a small hut, and be really quiet on his own.

But Ajahn Chah, for various reasons, kept pushing Sumedho into community life. When Sumedho had been a monk only eight years, he was made abbot of the first Western monastery in Thailand called Wat Pah Nanachat, which is still operating. They've had a series of abbots over the years, and it continues introducing many Westerners to the practice.

He kept grumbling, thinking, "Only eight years. I've only been a monk eight years and I have to be an abbot. Chah got twenty years of practice before he had to be an abbot. Now he's making me be abbot at eight years."

Not many years later, Ajahn Chah sent Sumedho to England to establish a Western monastery there. He had to live in London for two years and then start a whole community, becoming abbot. Now there's a huge and thriving network of monasteries in England and branch monasteries around the world that Ajahn Sumedho has launched. He's the head of a very large community.

In community life, as you know, it's not always easy. The number of problems in a community basically goes up exponentially with the number of people. So the bigger the community got, the more difficult it became. And he received a lot of blame and criticism from his community. The women were upset that they weren't being treated equally—they didn't have the same opportunities as monks. The young monks who were coming up and starting to feel their own power rebelled against him as the father figure and authority. Different people didn't like the way he was managing various aspects of the community. He really got blasted.

He talks about this quite openly—this is not private news. He said when it first started happening to him, he got very shaken by it. He really couldn't take the criticism. But over time, he started to use it as dharma practice.

He started to examine these experiences through the lens of personality view—recognizing how criticisms would trigger different self-images he held about himself, attachments to being perceived in particular ways that didn't truly define who he was. He realized that while he couldn't make his personality perfect—and nobody can—he could find his perfection in Buddha knowing, in Buddha mind. Taking refuge there, he began to see personality problems as simply arising and passing away phenomena.

He spoke about this transformation frequently, saying recently that he's genuinely grateful he didn't get to become a hermit. He's actually thankful that Ajahn Chah pushed him into community life, because otherwise he would never have faced his deep-seated fear of people.

I've heard others express similar gratitude—actually welcoming difficulties in their practice because these challenges illuminate areas where they're still clinging, still attached. Without the conflict that brings up such difficulties, these shadow areas would remain hidden. But when they're illuminated through the suffering of attachment, we gain the possibility to understand them and move toward greater freedom. This is why this aspect of blame can actually serve our practice and growth.

The Dalai Lama addressed this theme when he was here last summer. Surya Das, a Western teacher in the Tibetan tradition, posed a provocative question during a gathering of about 225 teachers in this very hall. He said, "There's significant popularization of Buddhism happening these days, which risks watering down or trivializing the teachings. Your Holiness, you're the greatest popularizer of us all. What do you make of this? What do you think about your role in popularizing Buddhism?"

The Dalai Lama was quiet for a moment before responding with characteristic directness: "Some people call me a living Buddha. Some people call me God King. No, I am not. I'm just a simple Buddhist monk. But other people call me a counter-revolutionary, or they call me a wolf in monk's clothing." Then he said something that struck me deeply: "When that happens, I look back at my own intention. And if my own intention is good, I don't care what other people say. If they perceive differently, that's their problem. It's not up to me. If my intention is good, then I don't care."

He said those last words—"I don't care"—with remarkable strength and conviction. I was deeply moved by this combination of tremendous responsibility—being the main voice for Tibetan culture in the world—alongside the extreme praise and blame that comes his way, and his inner strength to hold that entire spectrum by returning to his own intention.

This offers us guidance when we encounter criticism. Can we examine our own intention? Was there something unskillful in our action—some thoughtlessness, intent to harm, or negligence? If so, can we simply acknowledge that and apologize? And if there wasn't, can we trust in that clarity? Can we

recognize that the criticism isn't appropriate or justified and remain confident in our own understanding, our own honest assessment?

For me, the challenge with criticism has been that when I've done something wrong, I become devastated as a person—as if I've transformed into a completely bad person because I've offended someone or acted unskillfully. This, of course, is unrealistic. We're all going to make mistakes occasionally, and that's actually perfectly fine. The key is not letting these mistakes invalidate our fundamental worth as human beings.

We're doing our best, and when I make a mistake, that's okay. This capacity for such spaciousness of heart comes from growing self-acceptance. The more I trust that overall I'm genuinely trying to do my best, the more I can allow imperfection to exist without devastation.

The other side is praise—how do we relate to appreciation and positive feedback? In many cases, this proves even more challenging to receive gracefully than blame.

I don't know if you've ever noticed this, but if you've done something in a group, one person might come up and say, "Wow, that was great. I really appreciated your comment." And somebody else will come up and say, "I thought that was really the worst comment of the whole thing. I was very offended by what you said."

Which one sticks in your mind longer? The praise just sort of comes in and out, and the blame really tends to hang around for a while.

So with praise also, take a look and see if you can take in what's being said, because often what's being said, the real subtext of it is, "I love you," or "I dig you," or "I care about you." Something like that. Often praise is just kind of a way of touching another person and expressing affection.

When I was younger, I think I took praise in a kind of narcissistic way. I'd take it in and I'd kind of inflate my ego. I'd sort of pump myself up with it. But now I just try to tune into the kindness of what's being offered and the sense of affection that's being exchanged. And that just feels wholesome. It doesn't feel like there's a need for a whole lot of clinging around that piece of it.

When we are offering feedback to somebody else, constructive criticism, of course, the Buddha had some really clear guidelines for that that I try to keep in mind. He said, "One who is about to admonish another should realize within themselves five qualities before doing so: At the right time will I speak. Gently will I speak. Truthfully, not with exaggeration, will I speak. To their benefit will I speak, not to their harm. And kindly will I speak, not in anger."

These are beautiful guidelines for saying what sometimes needs to be said, but doing it with a real spirit of care and mutual benefit, mutual interest.

The next of the pairs is pleasure and pain. These also alternate all the time in life, as you see so clearly in

meditation retreat. Even for the Buddha, these alternations didn't go away. The Buddha had back pain. You can find this in the suttas. He'll say, "Moggallana," one of his two chief disciples, "you give the Dhamma talk tonight. My back is aching. I'm going to go lie down." And now they'll describe him going off to one side and lying down while Moggallana gives the talk.

His cousin, Devadatta, tried to kill him. Rolled a rock down a hill trying to kill the Buddha. Someone sent an enraged elephant after him, which it's said that he caused to halt with the force of his loving kindness. And he died actually from eating a poisoned meal. It's not any suggestion that it was poisoned purposely in order to kill him, but maybe the food had gone off or it was bad or something. He died from that.

So this alternation of pleasure and pain will come all the time.

In the ascetic traditions, in the Thai forest tradition, there's often an emphasis that the monastics try to reduce the pleasure in their life in order not to develop clinging. And Ajahn Chah at his monastery used to take all the beautiful Thai food that was brought by the lay people to feed the monks, dump it into one bowl, stir it all around, and then serve it out. So you'd get a curry mixed with a banana, mixed with a dessert, and that would be glopped into the bowls of all the monks and nuns. And Sumedho said it tasted awful. He said, "I can't eat this food any longer. I can't bear this any longer." And then he found a way to bear it longer.

Where I was practicing at Wat Suan Mok, Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery, it was a fantastic setting. We were given a huge degree of independence and self-reliance, and I think basically he trusted us. But because it was so comfortable, they made the food terrible. Because otherwise it would have been too attractive for people to just come down and hang out and have a cushy life for a long time. So the food there was awful. But everything else about the monastery was fantastic.

This is not an ascetic tradition, as you may have noticed. We actually refer to this style of practice as the upper middle way. We trust that you'll find enough pain from other sources in your practice.

The last of the pairs is called success and failure. Sometimes this couplet is put as fame and disrepute. Sometimes it's translated success and failure.

I want to talk about success and failure because I think it's a little broader for us. We often look at our lives this way around areas that we're responsible for. We look at our job situation. We look at our relationship. We look at our parenting or taking care of our own parents.

In all these areas, clearly, success is helpful. Doing a good job in all these areas is really, really a good thing. We need to provide for our families. We need to raise our kids in a loving way. We want to have a partnership, an intimate partnership that has kindness as its foundation and not conflict.

So there's a certain amount of self-confidence that comes when we bring a level of success into these areas. And again, this ties into the fourth of the metaphors, being able to look after ourselves happily. This

is important. It's self-confidence, it's not pride. We don't get pumped up about it, but we reassure ourselves that we can take care of ourselves well in this world.

And it's a little bit similar in meditation. We want to find a way that our meditation goes reasonably well, so that over the long term, we're seeing that our difficult emotional states and reactions are declining rather than increasing. I think this is kind of the best long-term gauge for our practice, that the difficult emotions are going down, not going up.

One of my teachers actually said, if you practice over a few years and these difficult emotions aren't going down, you're wasting your time with your Dharma practice. And you might as well take a break. Have a holiday. Do something different. But for the most part, this is a good gauge.

But beyond that broad generality, which really takes some years to see, we can get really concerned with too much detail of success and failure in a meditation retreat. And then it turns into striving. We get very goal-oriented, and we're near-term goal-oriented.

I was practicing quite some years ago in a system of meditation where certain experiences are considered a standard sequence of unfolding. And I knew a little bit about this sequence, and I knew my teachers would be very happy if I came in and described one of these experiences. So I was really putting myself under a lot of pressure to have one of these experiences. And as you know, you can't force experience in meditation. I hadn't really learned that yet. I was still trying. So I kind of tied myself up in knots trying to make certain things happen in my meditation.

I went in for an interview with my teacher and reported an experience I had and he said, "You're not very deep. I could tell by the way you walked in the room, you're not very deep. So-and-so is much deeper." And he named a friend of mine who was practicing on that same retreat. "They're much deeper than you are."

This didn't exactly raise my motivation level in the retreat.

So I think if we hold a very long-term view of practice, then we don't get so caught up in short-term success and failure. Because when we do and we fall into striving, we can really make ourselves tense. And if we're tense, then the real heart of the meditation—qualities like freedom and relaxation and compassion and loving-kindness and even wisdom—don't have a chance to flower. Those things flower from letting go, not from striving.

So have the sense that you really can just keep your orientation toward this moment, not try to create some special experience here and now. And trust that the letting go and the softening, the gentleness and the relaxation will allow the Dharma to unfold you, rather than you having to push the Dharma. That way it will unfold beautifully in the beginning, it will unfold beautifully in the middle, it will unfold beautifully in the end.

Ajahn Chah said, and I think I mentioned this earlier, that for a practitioner success and failure are of equal value. I love this. Because when we really take that to heart, we realize we can learn from our successes, we can learn from our failures. And it gives a kind of trust and fearlessness about our life. We're not so afraid to make a new step and maybe get off course, because if we are, we can learn from that too.

This kind of leads into an area I want to explore a little bit, which is what success means in work and relationship. Often success means, or I'd say has meant for me, getting my way. I have an idea of something I want to have happen in an organization or in a relationship, and I'll try to direct things so it unfolds in that way.

As an example, two years ago I was president of the board here at Spirit Rock.

I did that for a year. I'd been on the board for a few years, and then for one year, I was the president. And I felt a new burden when I became president of the board because I felt all of a sudden I was responsible for the organization. I felt responsible for what the organization decided to do.

So I felt as president, I had to get the rest of the board to make the right decision—right being the way I thought it should go. Partly this was just coming out of personal involvement, my own attachment. And partly it was really trying to take good care of the organization and have it unfold in the way that I thought was most skillful. So there was an interested and a disinterested component to it. But I really felt that if I didn't control the organization in that way, I was letting it down.

I remember one of the issues that came up at that time—we were looking for a director. We met Evan, who's our current general manager, and who I think is a really great director. He happened to be the first candidate we met. So we hadn't interviewed any other people. We met Evan and I really liked him right off the bat. I wanted to hire him without interviewing anybody else because he had another job offer pending.

Sally was also in the group involved and we both agreed, but we couldn't convince anybody else to do that. We tried. We struggled. We may have threatened and bullied a little bit. And we couldn't get it to happen. So we gave up. Evan took the other job. We went on a long search for a director and hired somebody else. Then about a year ago, we had another vacancy. Evan came back in the picture, went through the process, and he got hired. It would have been great if we could have hired him a year earlier perhaps, but this is the way it unfolded.

So I got quite frustrated at that at points. And I realized from that I couldn't control the board. I have enough trouble controlling my mind, much less the minds of fifteen other people. There's often in organizational life this wish to have our decision go, but it's something that's out of our control. In relationship, the same way. We may want it to go a certain way, but our partner might not want it that way.

So this is a quote from the Bhagavad Gita. This is Krishna speaking: "The way to freedom in this world is to act without attachment to the fruits of your actions."

Now this seemed really idealistic to me for a long time, but the more I started working with it, the more it became really practical to me. And I take it now as my direction for acting in the world without so much concern about success or failure.

The way that it comes across for me is I start to realize the limits of my control. I can't control fifteen other people's minds. I can influence them. And so what I try to do is to put things as clearly and as wisely and as lightly as I can because then I think it has the best chance of being heard. If I put things in a heavy way, there's going to be resistance.

So one of the ways that I check my own attachment is, can I be light with this idea? With this proposal, with what I'm trying to have accomplished? And if I see I can't be light with it, that's a sign of my own attachment. But if I can be light with it and put it clearly and my own emotions aren't disturbing the delivery, then it has the best possible chance of being received in a favorable way by the people who are listening.

And then I realize that's all I can do. I can put it out clearly and lightly and then it's out of my hands. And then I have to surrender to how everybody else sees it. This has been a fantastic learning for me in getting along more easily in groups, in relationship with other people. I can't control the outcome. I can only put in my best and cleanest effort.

This is also really true of meditation practice. If you're with the breath in order to get concentrated, you have an ulterior motive—it's not going to work. If you're with the breath in a pure and light and clean way with no ulterior motive, you'll get concentrated. So check your attachment.

in being with the breath or being with a meditation object.

So with this looking at these four kinds of outcomes—gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure—coming to a clearer relationship is really a way of purifying our motivation as we act and live in the world. And as our motivation becomes purified just to do what's right from loving-kindness, from wisdom and compassion, then we trust that the outcome will take care of itself, will take care of us. So we just find lighter and lighter ways to do the things that we're already doing.

Ajahn Jamnian was here about a year ago. He's a Thai teacher, a great master of loving-kindness and vipassana. And he said that in his monastery he sees people from the moment he gets up until the moment he goes to bed. He's receiving visitors. Lay people come and want to consult with him. Monks come to see him to talk about their practice. Nuns come to see him. Monks come to talk about running the monastery. And he says he never gets tired. He can be with people all day long and he never gets tired.

And we said, "How can you do that?"

And he said, "I do it because all the time I'm speaking and interacting, I'm resting in emptiness. I rest in emptiness the whole time and I never get tired. I tell my monks to do this, but they can't do it. They keep grasping at the things that come by, at the people, at the things that are happening. But I can rest in emptiness."

That is a fantastic talent. And what that really says to me is that he cares more about this place of freedom that he abides in than he cares about the passing, changing show of gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure.

And I think when we also care more about our freedom than the passing show, when we care more about awareness and attention than we do about outcomes, we will also be resting in emptiness, just like Ajahn Jamnian.

This is really why renunciation is such an important factor on the path. Renunciation doesn't mean we become a monk or nun and we put everything away. It means that we see things in the right priority. We see that the practice of freedom is the greatest contribution we can make for our own life and the well-being of the world. We trust that the right action will come from that place of freedom, so we try not to get too anxious about it.

Then our motivation for being in the world can shift from always trying to accumulate the positive aspects of this cycle—always trying to accumulate gain, praise, pleasure, success—to being in the world from a place of having renounced outcome. And our fundamental reason for being there can more become compassion. Compassion for ourselves, compassion for others. Just present, kind of hanging out, ready to purify our own hearts, deepen our own freedom, and offer that freedom to others.

I'll just close with a quotation from the Sutta Nipata. Someone asked the Buddha, "What is the greatest blessing?" And he answered in a few different ways, and this is one of the ways that he answered:

"When one's mind is sorrowless, stainless, and secure in the deathless, and one is not disturbed when touched by life's vicissitudes, this is the greatest blessing."

Let's just sit for a moment together.

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