Vicissitudes of Life

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:05:51

For those of you who weren't here at the beginning, my name is Guy Armstrong. I'm one of the Spirit Rock teachers. Sylvia couldn't be here this morning, so she asked me to sit in with you all, and I'm really happy to be here. I've had great times with Sylvia's group in the past, so I'm delighted to come again.

What I thought we might talk about this morning is something along the themes of our worldly life and our spiritual life. While these two don't need to be in conflict, they often are. Especially living in Marin County in the twenty-first century—life is so complicated these days and so expensive around here. That breeds some of the problems, and some of it also is a shift in values that happens as we get more and more into practice. So I wanted to talk about this from a few different directions—looking at both the outer and the inner relationship to these questions.

Somebody asked me at the end of a retreat recently, up the hill. They were in an interview and asked, "Why is it so hard to stay present in daily life?" I thought that was a really good question because I think we should all be looking at that question in our own lives, in our own experience.

So I'll just put it out to you all as a group: Why is it so hard to stay present in daily life?

A participant responded that it seems normal, even more than normal—universal. "Well, the distractions are endless, multiplying, and overwhelming."

"Lots of distractions," I replied. "Such as?"

"Traffic drives you crazy, or the price of everything drives you nuts, and the crowds of people swarming around are incredibly aggravating."

Certainly there are lots of stimulations, lots of things to deal with out there.

Another participant shared: "I'd like to just say how I had a difficult time coming here today. The exits or entrances to the freeway were closed and I didn't know how to come. I thought I was going to beat the whole system by having a tape of Sylvia Boorstein listening to her talking about how to be happy. She also has one on road rage, so that's a good one. So I was very focused on listening to her tape. Consequently, I got lost.

"Trying to outdo the Fairfax construction and taking side roads, I ended up going back to the East Bay. When I finally realized that I was really on the wrong road, I had to turn the tape off. And then I started to cry because I thought, 'I'm really confused. I'm really trying very hard.' I was just on my first residential

retreat this last weekend. I'm having a very difficult time re-entering, or holding on to that, and trying to come back here—it was the only safe place I knew to come, and yet I couldn't get here.

"I left in plenty of time, and it took me over an hour to get here, and I was late. Once I turned the tape off and clearly focused on what was going on—if I went on Center Street, I would avoid all that confusion. And I got here in a short time. So trying to beat the system doesn't seem to work. What happened is I wasn't fully able to listen to what Sylvia was saying because I had to pay attention to the traffic. Trying to do two things at once did not really work."

This is really a good illustration of spiritual values and worldly values, and where we put the emphasis in our attention.

Another participant offered: "I think the problem is that your mind tends to jump around from subject to subject anyway, even when there's no stimuli."

I'd like to look at both aspects of that comment. The first part was that the mind tends to jump around anyway, even when there aren't stimuli. I think this is a really important thing for meditators to start to notice and to take into account.

Our minds are habitual in their jumping around. This is sometimes described as monkey mind, where the mind just swings from one branch to the next and won't let go of one branch until it sees the next one to cling onto. This tendency of the mind to always be occupied with some kind of distraction is a really important thing to come to terms with.

This is something that can be trained. This is really the purpose of meditation—to train this habit to be in a different mode so that the mind starts to like being in the present moment more and more, and sees that it doesn't actually need these distracting thoughts to cling onto in times when there's basically peace or lack of stimulation around. So partly we could say this is a habit, but as you mentioned, when there are lots of stimuli coming in, it stirs the mind up even further.

Another participant observed, "I think the modern day tendency is that there are so many complexities in modern life that our attention is drawn in many ways. I've often thought that actually one of the banes of modern existence is this tendency towards what we call multitasking. And I think it's a fallacy because I read an interesting article that a scientific study has shown that attention cannot be drawn in more than one direction. Instead of increasing our focus, it actually decreases the focus on tasks. The concept of mindfulness seems to be a strong antidote to that. I noticed it the other day, making a peanut butter sandwich. It was actually a delight to take a moment and focus on what I was doing, spreading the peanut butter, cutting the bread. It was actually a delightful respite."

I think these comments are right on. The dividing of attention, when we look at what it does inwardly, fragments us. As a culture, we've kind of lost our ability to be wholehearted with what we do in the present moment. You look at kids—they have that. They're completely with whatever they're doing. You

give them one thing to do, and if it engages them, they're 100% with it. Whereas for us, we've been so fragmented by training that it's hard to bring 100% of our attention and energy to anything we do. Mindfulness offers a clear alternative of fully being with what is in the present.

Someone else added, "Underneath that is the reason why we feel we need to multitask. There are so many cultural messages saying we're not doing enough, we should be more, we're not good enough the way we are. You can get rather desperate activity trying to remedy that, but it doesn't seem to work."

This gets to another piece of the heart of what I wanted us to explore this morning: In our worldly life, are we doing the things that will actually bring us happiness? Or are we getting lost and distracted in our very activities, leading down a trail that will lead somewhere but not necessarily to real happiness?

A final participant noted that this conditioning is something really highlighted by the practice of meditation. When we start to try to come into the present in an ongoing and consistent way, we really see how easily the mind just swings to the past or the future out of habit, out of conditioning. The good news is that this can be changed, retrained. We can learn a new habit.

These comments have highlighted many of the themes I hoped we would touch on this morning. Let me ask: how many people here have been on at least a day-long silent retreat? And how many have been on a residential meditation retreat?

One of the things we find when we try to sustain this practice of mindfulness over eight hours or eight days is that it becomes pretty much a full-time job. It can take all of our attention just to stay in the present moment. The nice thing about the retreat setting is we don't have any other responsibilities. We don't have to interact with people, carry out our jobs, take care of our children, or look after our partners. The only task we have in those settings is to be in the present moment with our experience. And we find out how difficult that is, even when we don't have anything else to do.

But I mean, I don't know if people would be willing to share—how much of the time are you able to be in the present moment even under these ideal settings? Ten percent? Twenty percent? A little tiny bit? It's hard. It's tough work. And that's when we don't have anything else to do.

Now, then we go back into worldly life. As practitioners, if we want to take this practice on as a real commitment, we want to bring that ability to be in the present moment fully into our daily life as well. This is not just something we do on the cushion or during a daylong or in a silent retreat. We really want to live from that place of being in the present moment. And there's no reason that we can't, with training and with practice. That's really what practice is for. It is possible, but it takes a lot of work.

So in lay life, we have this full-time job of wanting to be in the present. We have another full-time job in lay life, in worldly life—which I'm sure you've noticed—of earning a livelihood, taking care of our family, looking after our health, doing our volunteer work and service work, looking after aging parents and children, relationships and so on. So we basically, in worldly life, have two full-time jobs: being in the

present and attentive to all of that, and taking care of all the external things that we need to take care of.

So it's no wonder that it takes a while to put these two full-time jobs together. Don't be discouraged if this doesn't happen automatically or easily. This is a long process of training. They can go together, but what's happening is that we have to divide our attention—or we might say our intention—just as you shared about driving over here and trying to listen to a tape and also follow the detour signs.

In worldly life we need to bring our attention into the present moment. That's one sustained attention we need to maintain. But then we also need to care for all the things of our daily life with a lot of attention also. So we're kind of divided, and I'd say there's an inherent conflict in the beginning for us because we're trying to support two intentions, two different intentions at the same time.

"It seems like there's just not really enough time today if you don't move like that. If I'm not reading while I'm walking my dog..."

I think we are way overscheduled. I think that's really true. And sometimes it seems like the only answer is to jam things in further together.

How many of you have seen the movie *Himalaya*? About the same number who've been on these residential retreats. *Himalaya* is playing at the Rafael and probably other places in the Bay Area. It's about village life—theoretically in Tibet, actually filmed in Nepal—about the life of people who grow grain and then trade that grain for salt, trade the salt for more grain. So you get a sense—it could have been set a thousand years ago, could have been filmed a thousand years ago—of the simplicity of the life that people used to live.

This is true in our culture as well. In western culture, farming was the occupation of most of the nation a hundred or two hundred years ago. That simple, down-to-earth life where there weren't things like tax-free mutual funds and a hundred different kinds of sandwich that you could order every time you go to the deli, ten different activities for your children after they finish the school day. Life was much, much simpler and kind of lent itself to being in the present moment in a way that modern life really doesn't.

So on some level I think we probably need to take a look as practitioners at the complexity of our outer lives. I see in myself as I get older and in a lot of friends as we get older a real interest in simplifying. Now there's a time in life when that's not possible. When you're starting a career and raising a family, especially in this area—it's so expensive, there are so many demands—there may not be any choices for simplification. But as we get older and some of the family responsibilities start to lift, I really think we need to look seriously at simplifying and creating space.

When we create space outwardly, it creates so much more space in the mind. It's amazing.

Taking the outer clutter away just opens up a huge amount of inner spaciousness. Even choices like how much television we watch, how many films we go to, how many magazines we read during a

week—renunciation in those areas can make a difference too. The outer dimension is important.

But I want to focus primarily on the inner. Part of the problem is that we have these dual intentions: to look after ourselves and our families while remaining present as we do so. But worldly life offers so many seductive possibilities. There are countless ways we can lose track of our spiritual orientation because our culture simply doesn't support spiritual values. I don't believe it supports them at all. Try talking to your employer about taking an extra week's leave for a meditation retreat and see how supportive the external situation is.

Worldly life offers many possibilities that are intriguing, fulfilling, rich—lots of people to meet, things to do, ways to become known, ways to serve. But they don't necessarily support a spiritual life. The problem is that we can get lost in any one of these avenues.

I was talking to someone this week who had lost her partner to cancer. She told me that before her partner's death, she was very wrapped up in her career—it was almost more important than her family. Going through the illness and death of her partner totally shifted her priorities. Her career now feels hollow to her because she sees how much more important the people in her life are.

But until we get a wake-up call like that, we can all tend to put a huge amount of emphasis on career. There are many enjoyable aspects to work situations these days, but at the end of the day, I wonder if it's the most important thing in our life. This is something we need to examine.

I want to share a couple of quotations from what might be called a new breed of spiritual teacher—people not connected with any tradition who have awakened on their own. Eckhart Tolle is a prime example. His book, *The Power of Now*, has been on the San Francisco bestseller list for about four months. It's not on the national bestseller list, but it has remained on the Bay Area list for some time.

Tolle is fifty-three, German by birth, now living in Canada. He had a spontaneous awakening some years ago and spent time sitting on a park bench, sharing his understanding with people who wandered by. Now he teaches, and I think his book is quite good.

He writes about working with difficult emotions, the afflictive emotions of the mind: "All these emotions are modifications of one primordial, undifferentiated emotion that has its origin in the loss of awareness of who you are beyond name and form."

This is dense, so let me clarify. Who we truly are is not this body and personality. Who we truly are is something that goes beyond our name and form—something the Buddha pointed to as the deathless. All major religions point to an aspect of immortality in our being that is formless. Tolle is saying that when we lose touch with knowing that we are deathless in the most fundamental way, a deep anguish arises from that disconnection.

I'd also like to share from another teacher in this same vein: Tony Parsons, a British teacher born in 1933

who had a spontaneous awakening at twenty. In his book *As It Is*, he writes: "Whatever I seek or think 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."

Both teachers are essentially saying the same thing. Eckhart Tolle points to the pain of that loss; Tony Parsons points to the desire to return. Parsons suggests that all forms of desire are really just a longing to return to knowing who we truly are, because that's the only place lasting fulfillment can come from.

What I think happens in our worldly life is that these myriad forms of desire point us in different directions—toward money, fame, sexual relationships, pleasures of food and drink, beautiful houses. All these proliferating desires are misleading indicators of what we really want. What we really want is to know our being beyond name and form, beyond birth and death, beyond perishing. But having lost touch with that, we seek it through many avenues that ultimately cannot lead to lasting happiness.

This doesn't mean these outer activities are wrong.

We need to be involved in a livelihood that takes care of ourselves. We need to be involved in looking after our family and our partners and our parents. So the question is: to what extent can we be involved in those areas and not get misled about what's really important and where our real happiness is going to come from?

To me, the best description of where we get misled is spelled out by the Buddha in a sutta from the Anguttara Nikaya called "The Vicissitudes of Life." It's a great title. And it starts off like this: "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, success and failure, praise and blame, pleasure and pain."

He's basically saying the way we get misled is we mistake these eight conditions as the most important things in life. And the degree to which we invest in them is the degree to which we carry ourselves off from our true spiritual track.

I find these very helpful topics for reflection and to look in my own life at how much my focus in living and where I put my time and energy is around these eight situations, as opposed to the true spiritual practice of knowing who I am, coming back to my source. Because the problem with these conditions is they're always changeable. They always alternate. Have you ever known anyone who has experienced only gain, only success, only pleasure, or only praise? It's not possible. They alternate for all of us.

And if our happiness is bound up just with the positive half, we're going to get slammed when we encounter the negative. It's not through any fault of our own that we encounter the negative. Everybody encounters loss and pain and blame and failure. Even the Buddha. And I'll tell some of the stories about the Buddha's difficulties as we go, just so you know, even if you're really cooled out, these things happen to you.

Let me talk a little bit about each of them. I'll talk first about gain and loss, and I don't really want to get into the kinds of great losses in our life. I think losing a partner to death, losing a child, loss of parents—those are major things and hopefully we only encounter those relatively few times in our life. But mostly the Buddha talked about gain and loss in more worldly terms.

And in worldly terms, this is a great territory, the Bay Area, to see gain and loss. You've probably noticed the stories in the newspapers over the last year—the dot-com downturn, the stock market collapse. There are huge stories of wealth rising and falling in this area.

I'll just tell one from my experience. About thirteen years ago, I went to work for Microsoft. They were still a small company back then. I worked for them for about five years. It was after I left that they started getting into all their trouble—that's their problem.

My first boss, the guy who hired me into the company, was a really great guy. I liked him a lot as a person and as a manager. Shortly after I was there, he got into kind of a political difficulty in the company. He got passed over for a promotion, and the job went to somebody else in our office who he didn't respect, didn't think was a good manager. He was very upset that he'd been passed over, and he was more upset that now he had to report to this other person who he felt was not as good a manager as he was.

One thing led to another, and one day in a peak of anger, he resigned, tendered his resignation. Over the weekend he had second thoughts, because I came to find out he had about 10,000 stock options back then in Microsoft. And over the years since then, Microsoft stock has split a total of 72 times. So today that would be something like 720,000 shares of Microsoft, which he could have bought at something like a dollar a share. I figured out that today he would have been worth about $40 million if he had stayed with the company.

But in a fit of anger, he tendered his resignation. He called up on Monday and said, "You know, I'm very sorry. I didn't mean it. I'd like to take it back." But his new manager said, "I'm sorry. Your resignation has already been accepted." Forty million dollars. Boom.

A friend of mine commented because of the stock market collapse that he knows people who are worth twenty million dollars now who feel themselves to be poor because a year ago they were worth forty million dollars. And you know there's a lot of dukkha in the collapse of the stock market. We don't hear much about it, I think, because people at that level are embarrassed to talk about feeling poor with twenty million dollars—and probably they should be.

But there's a lot of dukkha in the collapse of the stock market, the gain and the loss.

So the Buddha goes on to talk about how he sees relating to these conditions. He says, "These eight worldly conditions are encountered by an uninstructed worldling"—meaning someone who hasn't heard the teachings—"and they are also encountered by an instructed noble disciple. What is the difference between these two?"

He goes on to say, "When an uninstructed worldling comes upon gain, he does not reflect upon it thus: This gain that has come to me is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change. He does not know it as it really is. And when he comes upon loss, he does not reflect upon it thus: This is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change. He does not know it as it really is.

"With such a person, gain and loss keep his mind engrossed. When gain comes, he is elated, and when he meets with loss, he is dejected. Being thus involved in likes and dislikes, he will not be freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, grief, and despair. He will not be freed from suffering, I declare.

"But, O monks, when an instructed noble disciple comes upon gain, he reflects on it thus: This gain that has come to me is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change. And so he will reflect when loss comes upon him. He understands these things as they really are, and they do not engross his mind. Thus he will not be elated by gain or dejected by loss. Having thus given up likes and dislikes, he will be freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, grief, and despair. He will be freed from suffering, I declare.

"This, monks, is the difference between an instructed noble disciple and an uninstructed worldling."

So the Buddha is basically pointing to an equanimity of mind as we meet the changing conditions that life presents—the changing conditions of gain and loss. And an important aspect of it is wisdom, that we see the impermanent nature of gain and loss. We see that nobody is always gaining. Nobody is always being praised. Nobody just has the positive side of these things. These things change for everybody.

There's another amazing story from the Tibetan tradition about this. This is a teacher named Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. He was born in Tibet in 1932, escaped from Tibet in 1959 and went to India. He's a very great Dzogchen master—one of the greatest probably of the last fifty years, and one of the few who came to the West and taught in the West, and somebody I had the pleasure of meeting. Very impressive man.

He'd practiced in Tibet and gotten a lot of high realization. He'd gotten instruction from some very great teachers. And then he came to India as part of the Tibetan refugee movement. And there wasn't a lot of provision for Tibetan refugees in India. There wasn't a great safety net, you might say.

He says, "I lived in India for twenty-five years by myself without accumulating anything. Just one old man alone. Sometimes I gave Dharma talks in monasteries. Sometimes I stayed with sadhus in Rishikesh and Hardwar, along the Ganges, in ashrams, under trees, wherever the descent of dusk found me. So many different dreamlike experiences. Sometimes I gave empowerments to great assemblies of people, including dozens of tulkus and lamas, where they put a golden initiation vase in my hand and I placed it on the heads of thousands of monks."

So here he was in this position of great exaltation and giving blessings to thousands of Tibetan practitioners.

"At other times I was utterly poor, living hand to mouth on the streets in Calcutta, wandering around with my hand out begging for pennies... So many unexpected ups and downs. Who can describe them? Life is like that—full of unexpected twists and turns, impermanent, ungovernable and unstable. What a spectacle!"

So even great realized beings encounter these same kinds of swings of fortune that we do. And then how do we relate to them? How do we deal with them?

The Buddha was not immune to these either. At one point it said in the suttas that he realized through his psychic powers he could take the highest mountain in the Himalayas and turn it into gold. And he contemplated, should he do that or not? I mean, that would have been good for the monks and nuns, right? To have a mountain of gold and then they could always be supported.

But he chose not to do it. And what he reflected on, he said, is that there's no end to the greed for gold. Once you start down that path, it's never satisfied. So he just didn't do it.

The Tibetan definition of renunciation is beautifully simple: to accept what comes into our life and to let go of what goes out of our life. Accept them both equally.

This teaching resonates with the Buddha's own words: "Insignificant, O monks, is the loss of wealth and fame. The loss of wisdom is the greatest loss. Insignificant, O monks, is the increase of wealth and fame. The increase of wisdom is the greatest gain. Therefore, monks, you should train yourselves thus: We will grow in the increase of wisdom."

Praise and blame present another fascinating area for reflection. I once thought the Buddha was so impeccable in his speech and actions that nobody could criticize him, that nobody could blame him. But this isn't the case at all. The Buddha encountered praise and blame just like everyone else. In fact, he taught that there is no one in this world who is not subject to praise and blame.

His own cousin tried to kill him. This cousin was also a monk who had grown jealous of the Buddha's position at the head of the Sangha. Wanting that position for himself, he attempted to murder the Buddha so he could take over. Fortunately, he missed.

The Buddha would often travel to villages with monks and nuns, only to have people spread false stories about them, slandering them and claiming they were evil people trying to harm the community. Sometimes villagers would try to deprive them of food out of jealousy or local disputes. Even the Buddha was not immune from such treatment.

Ajahn Sumedho, the great American teacher who was here about a month ago, shared a profound story about this. As a young monk, he simply wanted to be a hermit. He dreamed of going away to a cave or a little hut in the forest to practice on his own for the rest of his life. But his teacher, Ajahn Chah, kept forcing him into more and more responsibility in the monasteries, eventually making him an abbot after

only eight years of practice.

Ajahn Sumedho protested: "How can you do this after eight years? You practiced for twenty years before becoming an abbot. How can you make me one after only eight years?"

Ajahn Chah simply replied, "This is what's needed, Sumedho. You go do it."

Now Ajahn Sumedho deeply appreciates what happened. Being thrown into community life meant receiving so much criticism and anger that he had to learn how to work with these reactions. If he had simply gone into the forest to live a peaceful, solitary life, he would never have learned to deal with praise and blame. He would have always remained afraid of other people. But through years of community life, he developed remarkable equanimity—a kind of fearlessness you can truly feel in his presence. Now people can say anything to him, and he remains untroubled by it.

Pleasure and pain alternate in our lives constantly. I don't need to dwell on this since it's so central to meditation practice—observing how we respond to pleasure with grasping and how we try to push away pain.

Success and failure present another key area for contemplation. In certain ways, we naturally want to be successful. In our livelihood, we want to earn enough to support ourselves and our families. In relationships, we want happiness rather than suffering. We want to contribute meaningfully to the world through our work and service. But there's a way we can go beyond what's actually needed, becoming focused on accumulating wealth or fame and pegging our self-worth to external measures of success.

The same pattern appears in meditation. We want a practice that helps us open and grow. To me, the true measure of meditation is whether difficult emotions are diminishing over the years—less anxiety and fear, more generosity and kindness, less anger. These are the real tests. But these aren't short-term goals. To make genuine character changes, I think in terms of about five years to truly gauge whether practice is working.

There's a way we want to be successful, but if we try to control what happens moment by moment and base our success on that immediate control, we tie ourselves in knots. It's essential to approach meditation with a spacious attitude: Whatever happens when I sit down to meditate is perfectly okay. This openness itself creates the optimal conditions for practice.

If you become tight about wanting high-level concentration right now, or insist on staying with every breath for an entire hour, you can make yourself incredibly tense in meditation.

You don't get the benefits of relaxation from it.

Ajahn Chah had a saying that I like very much. He said that in worldly terms, everybody wants to succeed and they don't want to fail. But in spiritual terms, success and failure are of equal value. Success and failure are of equal value. We often learn more from failing than we ever do from succeeding, and failure

brings humility, which is such an important part of the path.

What we really want to develop as practitioners is a way to be in the world but not dominated by it. Sometimes we say "in the world but not of it," which I understand to mean not dominated by its values. When we're after worldly values, there's no lasting satisfaction because they're always changing. They alternate for everyone.

For me, being in the world but not of it means I'm in the world, but my intention is to deepen my understanding of who I am and to deepen my compassion and loving-kindness in the world. I try not to put my primary emphasis on gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure. The more I invest in those things beyond what's necessary to support my life and my family's life, the more I feel it takes energy away from the spiritual orientation.

There's a wonderful example of this attitude with Ajahn Chomnian, a Thai monk who comes here once a year. Many of you may have met him. In one dharma talk, he described his work as abbot of a very large monastery in Thailand. He's a famous monk there, and he explained: "I see people from the time I get up in the morning until I go to bed at night. Sometimes non-stop. I'm just seeing people all day long. It's monks and nuns who want to talk about their meditation practice. It's lay people coming from the nearby town or village to talk about their family life and work situation. It's monastery administrators who want to know how much money we have to spend on new buildings. I receive people all day long."

But he said, "I never get tired. I try to tell my monks how to do that, but nobody else seems able to do it. I'll tell you my secret: I never get tired because I'm always resting in emptiness as I talk to them."

The way I interpret this is that he is always in a space of non-clinging, a space of freedom. Even though these stories of gain and loss, suffering and happiness are going on in front of him, he doesn't cling to them. He's not drawn out of that space of peace—that clear, aware seeing—by the changing conditions of life. This is what's truly needed to be in the world but not of it.

This means we actually have to care more about our freedom, our inner freedom, than we care about the changing nature of gain and loss, success and failure going on all around us. This is why renunciation is such an important value. Renunciation doesn't mean you have to give away all your goods and move out of Marin to live in a shack in the Sierra. It means that mentally we're not so invested in those outward things. It's giving up the inner clinging that opens the door to freedom, not necessarily giving up the outer.

When we're not in the world so much about getting, getting, getting for ourselves, our motivation shifts. We can start to look at our reason for being in the world more from a place of giving. This is where our practice begins to enter onto the bodhisattva track. When our reason for being in the world moves from getting to giving, that opens the door for us to act and be in the world as bodhisattvas. A person like that, in the real flowering of the bodhisattva spirit, remains in the world out of concern for others.

I'll close with a quotation from Shantideva, one of the Dalai Lama's favorites, from the Guide to the

Bodhisattva's Way of Life: "For as long as space endures and as long as sentient beings remain, may I too abide to dispel the unhappiness of this world."

Let's stop there and see if there are comments, reflections, or discussion.

A participant raised a point about my earlier comments on farming: "It's a little off everything you discussed, but at the very beginning when you talked about life on the farm as a life of simplicity and so much better than our modern complexity, my partner's parents and grandparents grew up on farms in Wisconsin. They worked night and day, and they hated it. I understand what you're saying—there's a simplicity that we would like to feel. I enjoy farming myself, for example, which doesn't have all the pressure to make money and survive attached to it. But I think the reality of farming may not have been so simple."

You're absolutely right. The ideal I'm speaking of is concealed within farming but is, of course, just that—an ideal. The reality of farming for survival was often grueling and difficult.

I agree with that. It's an interesting question how livelihood has evolved over the centuries, even thousands of years of human life. Someone who had studied anthropology quoted a figure to me that I haven't verified, but it may be true. She said that when human beings lived as hunter-gatherers, on average we spent about two hours of our day supplying ourselves with food. That meant there were basically twenty-two hours for other occupations.

From my time in Asia, farming is still very hard work and doesn't bring much income. But there are also seasons where there's not much work at all. Even if people work hard for six months a year—planting rice, tending to it, harvesting it—in the dry period, for rice farmers there's not much to do. So there seem to be much bigger chunks of leisure time built into farming lifestyles than in our modern way of life.

But it's interesting that when you present the alternative to young people today anywhere in the world—to move off the farm and come to the city—they almost all take it. Part of it is because farming life is hard work. Another part is that it's not very glitzy. The nightclubs, the discos, all the action is in the cities. This is happening throughout Asia. Traditional ways of life are being lost as countries become developed. It works for greater comfort and a higher standard of living. I'm not sure it works for dharma values.

Even though farming life is hard, there's a way in which farming economies can better support dharma values through their simplicity. Buddhism in Thailand was stronger fifty years ago than it is today, and I think part of that is the increased affluence. All through Asia, if communism doesn't get Buddhism, capitalism is going to. That seems to be the story.

"This might seem obvious, but I'm trying to understand non-duality. When you were talking about pairs of opposites and told the story of Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Chah being in emptiness or not reacting to either side—are they in non-duality? When you're not affected by both sides, is that what non-duality is?"

There are probably depths to the term non-duality. The main term I would use for their stance is equanimity—where you're not so thrown by the changing circumstances of life. If equanimity deepens, I think it goes into non-duality when you realize there's no self there to own the gain or the loss. Because that's the real non-duality: self and non-self.

When you see through the fiction of subject and object—a subject to experience the gain or loss, and gain or loss as the object—that's what creates the sense of dualism. When we create a strong sense of subject and object in relation to something happening, it brings up the sense of self. Non-duality really means the sense of self is not present, so there's not a very strong experience of subject and object. Even if there's a slight experience of subject and object, if the wisdom factor is present, we know there's no true self involved. Those subject-object formations just arise lightly in the moment, but they don't grab us. They don't deceive us.

"I'm following on what you said about staying in that sense of equanimity in all our relationships. You know, I call it being with somebody who—it's not their fault, but for me they're maybe an energy sucker. You're with them and you're just exhausted for whatever reason. To be able to hold that place of equanimity—I can see where that would be wonderful. To be in that place all the time, I think that would really be it. But I'm not sure I could do that on an ongoing basis. That must take a lot of practice."

The near enemy of equanimity is indifference. It sounds like the person you were with may have been manifesting indifference rather than true equanimity. True equanimity never closes the heart. It's not about withdrawing or becoming emotionally unavailable. It's about holding someone's pain or joy with complete presence and love, while simultaneously understanding that their experiences are unfolding according to the natural laws of karma.

When someone we care about gets cancer, true equanimity would look like being fully present with their suffering, offering whatever support we can, feeling the natural grief and concern that arises, and at the same time holding the bigger picture that their illness is part of their karmic journey. It's not about being detached or unmoved. It's about being deeply moved and simultaneously peaceful with the reality of what is happening.

Indifference, on the other hand, is a closing down, a withdrawal, an emotional distancing that can feel very cold and hurtful to someone who is suffering. So I think what you experienced was not true equanimity at all, but rather this near enemy of indifference.

True equanimity would have allowed that person to be completely present with you, to feel their own grief about your illness, to offer whatever support they could, and to hold you with tremendous love while also holding the understanding that this illness was part of your path. Does that distinction make sense?

The Brahmaviharas always work together. We can't practice true equanimity without metta, without loving-kindness. The heart stays wide open. We just add this quality of accepting what is, of understanding

the lawful nature of experience, without closing down to the immediacy of what's happening.

And so equanimity really comes from a place where the heart is open and can feel and respond to other people's suffering, but there's no inner disturbance happening alongside that responsiveness.

What it sounds like to me is that your friend had an equanimity that was shading toward indifference and didn't have the kind of equanimity that includes a truly compassionate dimension. Equanimity can be used to armor the heart, which is not what's supposed to happen. The Brahmavihāras are meant to open the heart.

If you look at the Dalai Lama, he's like a grandmother when he's around somebody who's suffering. He'll enter a group and his radar will zero in on the person who's experiencing the most pain, and he'll go directly to them—taking care of them, talking with them, holding them. But at the same time, he does this with tremendous humor. He won't fall into pity or become glum about the situation. He maintains this bright, joyful presence even while being with people who are suffering. The full expression requires this balance.

A participant named Lynn offered a beautiful insight: "When we're truly wishing ourselves happiness and wishing happiness for other people, we're wishing them to be in that state of emptiness—that openness—so they can take whatever comes and see it in perspective, not owning the things happening around them, but remaining in that spacious state."

This points to something profound. The heart of happiness might indeed be freedom itself. When we engage with the mettā phrases over time, they reveal different sources and conditions for happiness. The first phrase points to being safe and protected from harm. The second relates to being happy at heart. The third connects to harmony with the body—either through health or acceptance of illness. The fourth involves living with ease in the outer world, through harmonious livelihood and family relationships.

As we dwell with these phrases through sustained practice, we see that all of these are components of happiness. But the deepest happiness the Buddha spoke of was inner freedom, inner peace. This becomes one of the essential qualities we wish for others.

There's an important recognition that equanimity is not a passive or neutral quality—it's profoundly benign and beneficial. Equanimity is one of the highest states the Buddha described. In the list of the seven factors of enlightenment, it appears as the factor that immediately precedes enlightenment itself. It appears on numerous important lists, including the Brahmavihāras.

This state of mental balance that remains unmoved by the constant changes of life—the comings and goings, the ups and downs—represents perhaps the closest approximation to nibbāna, to the unconditioned reality, that we can point toward. It is a great state of freedom, where we can meet whatever arises with an open heart that neither pushes away nor clings, but simply receives with wise and compassionate presence.

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