Vicissitudes of Life

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 31:40

For those of you who weren't here at the beginning, my name's 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 happy 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 21st century. Life is so complicated these days and so expensive around here. That breeds some of the problems, and some of it is also a shift in values that happens as we get more and more into practice. So I want to talk about this from a few different directions—a little bit the outer and also the inner relationship to these questions.

Somebody asked me at the end of a retreat recently, up the hill, during an interview: "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? It seems to be more than normal. It seems to be universal.

"The distractions are endless, multiplying and overwhelming," someone responded.

"Yes, lots of distractions. Such as?"

"Well, the traffic drives you crazy. The price of everything drives you nuts. The crowds of people swarming around are incredibly aggravated."

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

"I'd like to just say how I had a difficult time coming here today. There were detours on the road. The exits or entrances to the freeway were closed and I didn't know how to come. I thought I was going to beat this by having the dharma tape on, trying to walk through the Fairfax construction, taking side roads and ending up going back to the East Bay. And when I finally realized that I was really on the wrong road, I had to turn the tape off. I was having a very difficult time re-entering or holding on to presence. 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 still was going to be late. But once I turned the tape off and then clearly focused on what was going on, I went on Center Street, avoided all that confusion, and got here in a short time. So trying to beat the system doesn't work. What happened is I wasn't fully able to listen to the tape because I had to pay attention to the traffic. So trying to do two things at once did not really work."

Thank you. This is a really good illustration, isn't it, of spiritual values and worldly values and where we put the emphasis in our attention. I do want to come back to this because I think this is a good example to explore.

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 it won't let go of one branch until it sees the next one that it's going to cling onto.

So 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 see that it doesn't actually need these distracting thoughts to cling onto in times when there's basically peace or a 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, then it stirs the mind up even further.

I think in the modern day, there are so many complexities in modern life. I've often thought that actually one of the pains of modern existence is the pain towards what we call multi-tasking. And I think this is a fallacy because I read an interesting article yesterday or the day before in a San Francisco paper about a scientific study that has shown that attention cannot be drawn in more than one direction effectively. Instead of increasing our focus, we actually have to keep switching focus, and the tasks take longer.

Your comments are right on. The dividing of attention, when we look at what it does inwardly, fragments us. I think 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 one hundred percent with it. Whereas for us, we've been so fragmented by training that it's hard to bring one hundred percent of our attention and energy to anything that we do. And mindfulness does offer a clear alternative of fully being with what is in the present.

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

And this conditioning is something that really is 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, just out of habit, just out of conditioning. And the good news is that can be

changed. That can be retrained, and we can learn a new habit.

So I think these comments have highlighted a lot of the themes that I hoped we would touch on this morning, and I want to go into them all in a little more detail.

Let me just ask, how many people here have been on at least a day-long silent retreat? And how many people have been on a residential meditation retreat? Much of the same population, actually.

That's interesting. One of the things that 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 or the day-long setting is we don't have any other responsibilities. We don't have to interact with people. We don't have to carry out our jobs. We don't have to 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. We don't have anything else to do. But how much of the time are we able to be in the present moment, even under these ideal conditions? 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.

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 day-long 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—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, we 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 of trying to support two intentions, two different intentions at the same time.

I think we are way overscheduled. I think it'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—and it's about the life of people who grow grain and then trade that grain for salt. You get a sense, it could have been set a thousand years ago, could have been filmed a thousand years ago, you get a sense for the simplicity of the life that people used to live. And this is 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 sandwiches 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 it 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. And I see in myself as I get older, and I see in a lot of friends as we get older, a real interest in simplifying.

Now, there's a time in life when simplification simply isn't possible. When you're starting a career and raising a family, especially in this area where it's so expensive, there are so many demands that 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. So even choices like how much television we choose to watch, how many films we go to, how many magazines we read during a week—renunciation in those areas can make a difference too. I think the outer is important, but I want to focus most on the inner.

Part of the problem is that we have these dual intentions: to look after ourselves and our family and to be present while we do it. But worldly life offers so many seductive possibilities. There are so many ways that we can lose track of our spiritual orientation in worldly life because our culture doesn't support spiritual values. I don't believe it supports them at all. Try to talk to your employer about taking an extra week's leave to do 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, lots of things to do, ways to become known, ways to serve. But they don't necessarily support a spiritual life. And I think the problem is that we can get lost in any one of these avenues.

I was talking to someone this week who had lost their partner to cancer. She was saying that before her

partner's death, she was very wrapped up in her career—it was almost more important than her family. Then going through the illness and death of her partner totally shifted her priorities back. Her career right now feels kind of 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, I think we can all tend to put a huge amount of emphasis on career. There are a lot of fun things about many work situations these days, but at the end of the day, I wonder if it's the most important thing in our life. Again, something I think we need to look at.

I want to read a couple of quotations from a new breed of spiritual teacher that's popping up. They're not connected with any tradition, but they've sort of woken up on their own. One prime example right now is Eckhart Tolle. His book, *The Power of Now*, has been on the San Francisco bestseller list for something like four months. It's not on the U.S. bestseller list, I can assure you, but it has been on the Bay Area bestseller list for a while. He's fifty-three years old, German by birth, now lives in Canada, and just had a spontaneous awakening some years ago. He spent time sitting on a park bench and sharing his understanding with people who wandered by, but is now teaching. I think his book is pretty good.

He's talking about working with our 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 a little dense, so let me read this again. All afflictive 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. In other words, who we truly are is not this body and this personality. Who we are truly is something that goes beyond our name and form, something the Buddha pointed to as the deathless. All the major religions point to an aspect of immortality in our being that's formless. He's saying that when we lose touch with knowing that we are deathless in the most fundamental way, there's a deep kind of anguish that comes out of that.

I'd also like to read from another teacher in this same mode. His name is Tony Parsons. He's British, born in 1933, and he had one of these spontaneous awakenings when he was twenty. His book is called *As It Is*: "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."

These two are basically saying the same thing. Eckhart Tolle is pointing to the pain of that loss, and Tony Parsons is pointing to the desire to get back. What Parsons is saying is that all forms of desire are really just a desire to get back to knowing who we truly are, because that's the only place that lasting fulfillment can come from.

What I think happens in our worldly life often is that all these myriad forms of desire point us in all different directions—toward money, toward fame, toward sexual relationships, toward pleasures of food and drink, great houses.

And all these kinds of desires that proliferate 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 because we've lost touch with that, we seek for it in many different avenues that can't ultimately lead to lasting happiness.

This is not to say that 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, our partners, our parents. So the question is: to what extent can we be involved in those areas without getting 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 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. 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—to look in my own life at how much my focus in living, 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.

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. I'll tell some 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, starting with gain and loss. I don't really want to get into the great losses in our life—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.

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 tell one from my experience. About thirteen years ago, I went to work for Microsoft when they were

still a small company. I worked for them for about five years. It was after I left 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 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 and didn't think was a good manager. He was very upset that he'd been passed over, and even 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. 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'd like to take it back. But his new manager said, "I'm sorry. Your resignation has already been accepted."

Forty million dollars. Gone. Just like that.

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. There's tremendous dukkha in the collapse of the stock market. We don't hear much about it, perhaps because people at that level are embarrassed to talk about feeling poor with twenty million dollars—and probably they should be. But there is genuine suffering in these cycles of gain and loss.

The Buddha continues by exploring how we can relate to these conditions skillfully. He says these eight worldly conditions are encountered by an uninstructed worldling—someone who hasn't heard the teachings—and they are also encountered by an instructed noble disciple. What distinguishes these two?

When an uninstructed worldling experiences 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. When he encounters loss, he does not reflect: "This is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change." He does not understand its true nature.

With such a person, gain and loss keep his mind completely engrossed. When gain comes, he is elated; when he meets with loss, he is dejected. Being thus caught up 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.

But when an instructed noble disciple experiences gain, he reflects: "This gain that has come to me is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change." He reflects in the same way when loss comes

upon him. Understanding these things as they really are, they do not engross his mind. Thus he will not be elated by gain or dejected by loss. Having 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.

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

The Buddha points us toward an equanimity of mind as we meet the changing conditions that life presents. A crucial aspect of this wisdom is seeing the impermanent nature of gain and loss. We understand that nobody is always gaining, nobody is always being praised, nobody experiences only the positive side of these conditions. These things change for everybody.

There's another remarkable story from the Tibetan tradition that illustrates this. It concerns a teacher named Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, who was born in Tibet in 1932, escaped to India in 1959, and became a great Dzogchen master.

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