Delighting in the Wholesome: The Power of Mindfulness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 53:41

The talk tonight is called Delighting in the Wholesome.

First I want to say what a pleasure it is to be here, to be able to drop into the retreat at this point, to be teaching with great colleagues and old friends, to share this unfolding that you are all doing. It's really an honor and I'm happy to be with you. I appreciate that it's not an easy thing to do, whether it's six weeks or three months. It requires a lot.

Coming back to IMS, I'm reminded of my early days here. I was on one of the early staffs. Thinking about my first retreat experience here—I did my first Vipassana retreat in 1976, and Joseph was one of my teachers. After that retreat, I was very inspired by the practice. In the time that I could, I went home, packed up my house, put all my belongings into storage, sublet my apartment, and moved to IMS as a yogi.

I did a six-month retreat when I came here, which started with a 30-day self-retreat. At that point, I'd only done one 10-day retreat. That 30-day self-retreat was one of the hardest experiences of my life. I can't believe, looking back, that I did such a stupid thing. But I got through it.

At the end of the retreat, we were going for exit interviews with Joseph, who was in what was the library at that time, what's now the downstairs office. I was sitting outside on a bench and met one of the fellow meditators who happened to be Rodney Smith. Many of you know him—he's a senior teacher here at IMS. I'd just been practicing for one month, but Rodney had been practicing for three or four. So to me, he was a super advanced meditator, God if you will, at that point.

I said in a very humble way to Rodney, "Please tell me, does it get any easier?"

Rodney's reply was, "As far as I know, no."

That was our experience at that time. I'm happy to report, after some years, it has gotten easier. So there is good news in the story.

But still, six weeks or three months, even for long-time meditators, can really take us to the limit of our capacities, can really take us to the edge of our patience, our tolerance, our faith in ourselves, our courage, our endurance. Most of us bump up against a wall somewhere, if not often, in a long retreat like this. So I want to acknowledge the incredible work that you're doing. I know that it's not always easy, even for veteran meditators.

I just talked with a good friend who came out of a long retreat this year. Before they started describing their experiences, they said, "You know, I want you to know this was no small thing. I sat for this number of months. It was no small thing for me." This friend has many years of meditation experience. They said, "I want you to know parts of it were hell." Then they smiled and shrugged. I just smiled with them because I know that sometimes it's like that, even for veteran meditators.

It reminded me of an article I read in the New Yorker not so long ago. I want to share a little bit of it with you. This is by an author named Ian Frazier:

"According to a study just released by scientists at Duke University, life is too hard. Authors of the 1,200-page study were hesitant to single out any particular factors responsible for making life tough. A surprise, they say, is that they found so many. Before the study was undertaken, researchers had assumed by positive logic that life could not be that bad. As the data accumulated, however, they provided incontrovertible proof that human endurance equals just a tiny fraction of what it should be, given everything it must put up with. Nine out of ten of the respondents stated that they would give up completely if they only knew how. The remainder also didn't see the point of going on any longer, but still clung to a slight hope for something in the mail. In a personal note in the afterward, researchers stated that statistically speaking, life is, quote, 'just too much,' and as yet they have no plausible theory how anyone gets through with it at all."

I hope you know this is a parody. I thought that this kind of applied to retreat practice as well—that we really don't understand how anyone gets through it at all. The difference is that here you've also given up the hope of something coming through in the mail, so it's even more difficult.

Whether you've been here practicing for one day or for six weeks, sometimes the question arises: what does this have to do with how hard life is? Is it just accentuating how hard life is? Sometimes in the middle of a retreat, we forget why we're here. Often when I start a retreat, I find the doubting mind comes up early on very strongly as I think about all the other things I could be doing with my time. And I wonder, what am I doing here?

So I wanted to talk this evening about the answer to that question in a very simple way—what it is that we're doing here, where it leads, and why we do it.

When the Buddha talked about the Eightfold Path, he talked about three factors related to meditation. I like to think of the Eightfold Path as his description of his awakened mind, but in terms that we can understand. So I like to think of these three meditation factors as very direct pointers to the qualities of an awakened mind. And these three factors are effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

Effort, as we relate to it here, is the willingness to come back again and again. Mindfulness is the quality of connecting with our experience in the moment. And concentration is that unification of mind that lets the mind be sustained in the present moment over a period of time.

I'd like to talk mostly this evening about the quality of mindfulness, the practice of mindfulness. I want to start by reading the end of the Satipatthana Sutta, the Sutta on the Foundations of Mindfulness, the key discourse from the Majjhima Nikaya where this practice is laid out. This is the very last paragraph of the Buddha's words:

"Bhikkhus, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, and for the realization of nirvana, namely, the foundations of mindfulness."

That paragraph moves me every time I read it—that this simple practice of paying attention in the present moment is the direct path for the disappearance of pain and grief. Not just for the easing of pain and grief, for the disappearance of pain and grief. That's a very powerful statement. How does that work?

We might say that the very heart of the meditative path, the heart of the Buddhist path, is this quality of presence, of being oriented and abiding in the present moment. The sign on the casino wall says you must be present to win. It's true in the casino and it's true in the meditation hall. The Dalai Lama said, "The present moment is the only place that we can experience love."

When we dwell in the present, we avoid a whole host of problems because the present is so simple and is largely not a bad place to be.

Here's another quote from the Buddha: "Let not a person revive the past or on the future build their hopes, for the past has been left behind and the future has not been reached. Instead, with insight, let her see each presently arisen state. Let her know this and be sure of it, invincibly, unshakably. One who dwells thus ardently, unceasingly, by day, by night—it is she who has a very auspicious day."

So this quality of present moment orientation is a quality that lets us see things just the way they are, free from the haze of conceptions. This direct, non-verbal relation to reality lets us see things without choosing, or comparing, or evaluating, or judging, projecting, or interfering. It's such a naked relationship to what is, to reality. Nyanaponika Thera used the term "bare attention" because we aren't adding anything to this present moment experience.

We often say that what we're doing here is practicing the Dharma. I really like to think of it as practicing the truth—practicing being with the truth of things just the way they are, not the way we imagine them to be, want them to be, wish they were, remember them being once, hope they will be in the future—just the way they are exactly in this moment.

Reality is our teacher. Another word for reality is nature. Nature is our teacher, the nature of all things—the internal nature of mind and body, the outer nature of mind and body. My teacher in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, liked that phrase a lot: "Let nature be your teacher." Nature is all around us. We are nature. All we need to do is wake up to nature the way it is, and it will reveal its truths to us.

So we see things freshly. Seeing things freshly, we may see things beyond preconceptions. There's a story of Picasso when he was still a young artist and not yet famous enough to be universally revered. Someone came to him and said, "I don't get this art you're doing. Why don't you paint things that look like real things? That's the kind of art that I like." And Picasso said, "Well, what do you mean? What looks like a real thing?" The man pulled out something from his wallet and said, "Well, look, I want to show you a photograph."

This is something real. And he showed him the photograph—a picture of his wife. Picasso looked at it and said, "Is this what she looks like?" The man replied, "Yes," without thinking twice. Picasso said, "She's very small, isn't she? And also rather flat. This probably doesn't really look like your wife at all."

Sometimes in our meditation experience, we find things that don't look the way we think they should look. But instead of trusting our opinion, it's really better to trust our experience, to trust our direct knowledge of the way things are.

The Buddha said we make four fundamental errors in thinking the world is one way and finding out it's another. We think it's permanent when it's impermanent. We think that it's satisfactory when it's not. We think that it's self when it's not-self. And we think that it's all beautiful when some of it is not beautiful. These are the four errors that we see beyond when we come directly in touch with reality as it is.

So why is this important? I'd like to just ask you to try a little experiment. You don't have to do anything different or change your posture or even open your eyes. But I'd like you to just sit for a minute, simply being present, without any effort or any focus. And I'd like you to just notice how long you can sit like that before the mind starts to drift away from presence.

As it starts to drift away from presence, don't correct it. Let it drift for a bit. And now I'd like to ask you to correct the drift, if you've had any, and come back to presence. Connect again just with what's fresh and real. And whenever you're ready, you can just stop the exercise.

So I want you to just take a look at the quality of the experience from those two modes. Ask yourself, what was the experience like when I was just connecting with presence? Anybody notice any particular qualities?

Open, relaxed, ease, vibrancy or aliveness, soft, intimate, simple. What was it like once you let the drift go on for a little bit? What was the feeling of that experience? Tightens up, agitation, the peace being disturbed, things being stirred up.

You've seen this hundreds of times. I know each of you have seen this hundreds of times in your own practice. I just want to draw it out again as a little microcosm. In a way, this is the essence of the meditative learning—that when we can connect with the present moment, we discover an openness, intimacy, ease, relaxation, softness, simplicity. And as the mind drifts away from that, we wander into these stirred up waters, agitation, unease, all the confusion that comes from the whirlwind of thoughts

and feelings. I know this is not news to you, just a reminder.

So in one interview recently, I was talking to someone and the person said, "But the present moment is so pleasant. Why don't we just stay here?" I like that question. Not to think about or speculate about intellectually, but it sort of stops the mind, doesn't it? Asking a question like that can stop the whirlwind for a little bit. Why don't we just stay here in this present moment?

Looking at that question, I think there are a number of answers. One reason is just habit. We've developed the habit for a long, long time of going away, of enjoying the realm of thinking of past and future conceptualization. A lot of the meditative training is retraining that habit of mind so that over time there comes to be a preference, a clear preference from the gut, from the marrow, from the center of our being for presence as opposed to wandering, for simplicity as opposed to complexity.

But there's another reason, I think, for that drift that we experience.

When we retreat from the busy world and sit in meditation, we encounter what we might call the karmic tide of thoughts and feelings. We come into the meditation room and stop the body, but the mind doesn't necessarily stop because the mind has been cranked up over many, many years. When we sit, we experience this movement, this cranked-upness, really directly.

That movement of mind that's been cranked up has been generated by areas where we've invested our emotional energy—areas of life that we've cared about, that we're attached to, if you like that expression, where we put our energy with a certain desire for outcome, desire for result.

As we sit, often those areas of life where we've invested our thoughts and feelings and hopes and fears start to come back into consciousness. It may be around intimate relationship or the absence of it. It could be about family members who we're separated from. It could be about career or livelihood. It could be about money, success.

The investment in all those areas that we've lived out through our daily life—that investment is all part of karma. Karma is essentially action with a motivation, and where we've acted with that investment of energy, we have created our own karma, our own action from a motive. When we get quiet, we experience the momentum of that. It plays out again in our hearts and minds and bodies.

This is one important meaning of the equanimity phrase that you've probably all practiced with, which says, "All beings are heirs to their karma." This is one way we inherit our karma, right here on the cushion, as this tide is made up of our past actions.

The Buddha said, "By whatsoever a person has clung to, by that Mara will track them down." Mara is the mythological figure in the suttas who represents the obstacles to the deepening of the meditation. He's portrayed in the suttas as an actual being, an external figure, can also be understood as a force within our own mind. Whichever way you take it, the meaning is the same: by whatsoever a person has clung to, by

that Mara will track them down.

Frankly, as silent retreatants, we are all sitting ducks for Mara. Mara's got a direct bead on us in our quietude. It was really interesting—I was sitting at the Forest Refuge for a month in April. It had just opened and there was a two-month period of teacher retreat. I settled in fine, and the month had its usual ups and downs. But in looking back, I sort of looked back on it at the end of the month, and I saw that I got caught three times in relation to outside life things. The first one was about work. The second one was about relationship. And the third one was about money. It's just like Mara had a checklist on me. "Okay, what are the big areas? Yeah, relationship, work, and money. Okay, I'm going to get him on each of these." So I had my sufferings around those during the retreat.

What we find when we sit is that we're kind of at the mercy of this tide to a large extent, especially in the beginning of practice. We don't have much choice about what comes into the mind. It just comes when it comes. Sometimes it's really pleasant. We might remember something really fun that we've done. We might think about a vacation we're planning. We might bring up a meta-subject, a person that touches us a lot. Sometimes it's not very much fun. Sometimes we remember old conversations, unfinished business, times we got angry, times we hurt other people, times other people hurt us. And it can be really painful. An incident like that comes in the middle of a silent retreat and it impacts us really strongly because we're so open.

Sometimes we invest again and we amplify the karma, we perpetuate it, we build it up again, because we dwell with our thoughts, we have more reactions of hope or fear, liking or disliking, and the karma keeps getting extended.

Someone asked a while ago in an interview, "Well, when these thoughts come up about outside life situations, shouldn't we follow them? Because these are important areas of our outside life. Shouldn't we follow them and use this time in retreat to sort those out?"

This is a good question. I wouldn't just dismiss this question. Outside life and retreat life are not two separate things. It's one life. But I think that the understanding for me is more like this.

Those issues will come up anyway, whether we want them or not, to some extent. When they come, the question that occurs to me is, how do they best get resolved? Is an issue like that best resolved through more thought, or is it resolved best through a quiet intuition? And over years and years of practice, I've come to have a lot of trust that outside issues, life issues in general, get solved best by a quiet intuition.

So the thoughts come, and I try to just let them be on the back burner. I don't try to engage them at all anymore. Sometimes they engage me, but I try not to engage them. And I trust that if there's an important issue there, it will come at the right time. The thoughts will die or pass at the right time. But if it's something ongoing, I let the silence take care of it. And I trust that grounding my being more and more deeply in the silence will develop the place where the intuition can come from, that can really be a

creative solution. As I've just found for myself, when I think and think and think about life issues, it never seems to go anywhere. So I trust in that intuition, and I try as far as possible not to engage with those thoughts.

Well in retreat, of course, there's also the same karmic tide. It's not a different mind here and out there. It's the same mind. As retreat, especially a long retreat, starts to become our life, this is where we invest. This is where we start to have our preferences, the events of our days, and the things that we cling to or push away, the things that are hoped for, the things that are not hoped for.

So other questions start to go around. It's not so much after a while. It's not so much about work or relationship anymore. It's more about: was my sitting calm or was it agitated? Was my body comfortable or was it painful? Were my mind states today happy ones or suffering ones? Did I sit enough hours and did I walk enough hours? Was I deepening today or was I going backwards?

Now, these are not in themselves bad questions. As meditators, one of the skills you want to develop is the ability to understand the signs of your practice, particularly around factors like the hindrances and the seven factors of enlightenment or the five spiritual faculties—to understand when they're active and when they're absent, when wholesome states are present and when unwholesome states are present. So asking questions like this is not unskillful.

But as we get invested and this becomes our life, these questions get tinged and we lose the objectivity of dharma reflection and they come to be taken really personally. So rather than the clear dharma look of: how's the factor of mindfulness, how's the factor of energy, how's the factor of concentration, all the questions really start to hinge around one core question: Am I a good meditator? Or am I a terrible meditator? And that question has a deeper hook, which is: what does this mean about me? Am I an okay person? Or am I a really inadequate person? And that generates again the whole karmic tide. And we become attached to the results of meditation, sitting after sitting, day after day. And then these are the thoughts that preoccupy us. These are the thoughts that take us away from just the ability to connect simply and directly with what is.

The moment is so simple when we can come out of this karmic tide of investments in past and future. So this karmic tide is a big deal. It is what carries us away from the present moment. It does reveal our areas of holding, the areas of clinging—the very foundation of self or ego by what we've held on to. And it's a projective power of mind. It's a projection onto the present moment of something that's not intrinsically real. It's mind-made stuff. It's all stuff of thought and projection.

And then mindfulness, as we drop it into this situation, at first doesn't seem like anything. We're mindful for a few moments and it doesn't touch this stream of thinking and feeling, past and future. It doesn't seem to have any impact on the projections. That's really because at that point our mindfulness is like a baby or like a child and these projections are all grown up. We've been doing these projections for a lot of years and we generally don't take breaks from them. We've been doing them pretty non-stop for a lot of years.

So they've built up a lot of power and the mindfulness can be fairly new.

But then we start to look. When we are able to connect with the present, when we are able to abide with reality, we discover that different feeling of ease, simplicity, calm, peace. And we start to realize that there is an opening that's happening.

And we realize that mindfulness has stopped that flood. It is the most effective way to stop that karmic tide. It's mindfulness that has done it. It's our connection to the present moment that has halted the advance of that karmic tide.

The Buddha said, actually, mindfulness can dam any flood. Any flood. He used a lot of images of water for our wave of thoughts and feelings. He talked about the tides of conceiving, the ocean of samsara, the flood, the influxes of the taints or asavas.

So every moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom where this karmic wave has been halted, and we connect with reality. And remember that reality is what we learn from. So it's really important in your practice to get in touch with this feeling of direct presentness, of peace—the peace that's found in that connection. The Buddha said that this peace is the highest happiness.

Please start to recognize when it's there so that you know when mindfulness is strong and you can feel the effect of it. This really is the path to the end of suffering. And all our practice is just about making that mindful space more and more of our life—more and more of your day, more of the sitting, more of the walking, more of the meals.

As we start to get familiar with that peace and ease, we find that there's a warm quality in that attention, in that mindfulness, that it starts to take on some of the tinge from our metta practice. It's not a cold, analytical, detached, scientific observation. It's a full engagement of your being with the present.

When the fullness of your being starts to come together through this factor of concentration, of unification of heart and mind, then your heart is all there with the present moment, as well as your head, your brain, your intelligence. And so the merging of metta and mindfulness is in this quality of connecting to the present with what we might call a warm attention—a warm attention in the present moment.

There's an image that I heard on NPR a few years ago that's just stuck in my mind as the sort of manifestation of this warm attention. You may remember that a few years ago, the Italian actor Roberto Benigni won the Academy Award for the picture *Life is Beautiful*. He got the Academy Award and he made an over-the-top acceptance speech, as Italian actors are meant to do.

Because of his fame at that point in time, he got to go to the White House and meet the president, who at that time was Bill Clinton. He entered the Oval Office to meet Clinton, and instead of slowly walking over, extending his hand and shaking hands, Benigni ran toward Clinton and leaped up into his arms. Clinton is a big guy, and so he was able to just catch Benigni's legs and hold him. There they were in this embrace

where he was just holding Benigni by the legs, and Benigni had his legs and arms wrapped around Clinton's waist and chest. And Benigni said, "I'm so happy to meet you."

Clinton's Secret Service was freaking out on the other side of the room: "What is this guy doing to our president?" But that's always stuck in my mind as a really beautiful symbol of warm attention. Knee pain? I'm very happy to meet you.

So not only does mindfulness have a quality of being really vitalizing and connecting in the present moment, but it's also onward leading. It's not just good in itself, but it has a future. Its power builds. As you've been here over your six weeks, if you've been here that long, as you stay here over the next six weeks, you will feel the incredible power of mindfulness as it builds. It really changes our relationship to life, but it does it one moment at a time.

So we may not know it's doing it while it's happening. It's like when the leaves change. From one day to the next, the color isn't that dramatically different. But after two weeks, it's really different. And by November, it's really different.

The Buddha said, "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying, 'This will come to nothing.' By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." That's what we're doing moment after moment. We're filling that jar. And when that jar gets fuller and fuller, it has an incredible power. It can dam any flood. It doesn't matter how old the flood is. It doesn't matter how many years we've invested in that karmic tide.

Sometimes very clear. Sometimes angry, sometimes loving. Sometimes confused, sometimes seeing things distinctly. The whole range of the human experience probably came through you today.

The question we can ask ourselves is: which of these states am I watering? Which am I feeding? Which of these qualities, which of these states of heart and mind, am I investing my time in? Am I investing my interest in? Because the ones we invest in are the ones that grow stronger.

This is why the Buddha taught that we can choose our rebirth. We can actually choose what we become. Because the mind state we die in, the one we're most familiar with, the one we've watered the most—that's the one that has the momentum to carry us forward into the next moment, into the next breath, into the next day, into whatever comes after this life.

So we have tremendous power in this choice of what we water, what we cultivate. If we keep watering the states of aversion and greed and delusion, they get stronger and stronger. They become the karmic tide that sweeps us along. But if we water the states of loving-kindness, of wisdom, of mindfulness, of compassion—these are the ones that grow.

The practice is really this simple: noticing what's arising, and then making the choice about what to water. When anger arises, we can water the anger by thinking about why we have a right to be angry, by rehearsing our grievances, by building our case. Or we can notice the anger with mindfulness, see it

clearly, and choose to water the mindfulness instead. We can let the anger be there without feeding it, without giving it the fuel it needs to grow.

When fear arises, we can water the fear by spinning stories about everything that could go wrong, by catastrophizing, by letting our imagination run wild with worst-case scenarios. Or we can notice the fear with gentle awareness and choose to water the qualities that can hold fear with compassion—the mindfulness that sees fear as just another passing mental state, the loving-kindness that can embrace our frightened heart.

This isn't about suppressing anything or pushing anything away. It's about the very simple practice of choosing what to feed. Like drops filling a jar, each moment of mindfulness, each moment of choosing to water the wholesome qualities, adds to our capacity to meet whatever arises with wisdom and love.

Sometimes clear. That's the truth of things. That's the truth we see when we turn on the lens of mindfulness. Experience is always changing, and we don't have to look for a place to land because it will keep changing.

I just came a few days ago from California, and some of you may know—if you've been out in the world—that California had record highs a week ago. It was 92 degrees in San Francisco. Ninety-two degrees! It was pretty nice the first couple of days we were here, and when I saw the sun this morning, I thought, "Oh, this is the way New England fall is supposed to be. This is great. It ought to be like this."

That's a misleading thought, because it wasn't long before it started to cloud up and get colder. As long as I'm stuck on the idea that this is the way things ought to be, then I can't stand the change in weather. As long as we're stuck on the idea that sitting should always be calm, we can't stand the agitation. We think it's wrong because it's supposed to be different.

But mindfulness doesn't have any should-bes. Mindfulness isn't stuck on an ideal. Mindfulness is willing to learn from reality. How are things in this moment? Let me find my freedom in relation to that.

Our moods and all the changing experiences of meditation are just like the weather. If we have an idea it ought to be a certain way, we're going to suffer in the face of change. The refuge in this change is mindfulness itself—finding within ourselves that quality that can make clear connection to the moment, to reality, in whatever form it's expressing itself. This becomes a refuge beyond change: this clear knowing.

The word upekkhā, usually translated as equanimity, has the etymology of "looking on." So equanimity is about looking on without being so moved by the changing conditions of life. Mindfulness can be with any experience.

Ajahn Sumedho, the Thai forest monk of American descent, has a phrase I like a lot for relating to changing conditions. He says, "It's like this." Whatever experience he's having—it's like this. Desire is like

this. Non-desire is like this. Ill will is like this. Metta is like this. Suffering is like this. Non-suffering is like this.

There's so much wisdom in this phrase because we all have both sides of these dualities—we'll all experience them during our time here. If we think one way is how it ought to be, then we'll suffer. But wisdom can see them both and understand them both. Suffering is like this. Freedom is like this.

In connecting with this truth again and again, we develop awareness that's less and less preferential, more and more open to things just the way they are.

I want to talk about concentration on another night, and I'm sure we'll talk about effort as the retreat goes on. Because it's the early days for some, midpoint for others, it's also a good time to talk about motivation and intention.

A student said in an interview a few months ago, "I came on this retreat because I'm concerned about how to respond to events in the world. But one doubt that arises for me is: Is this just a self-centered practice? Are we just doing this for ourselves?"

I wonder how each of you responds to that. You're all experienced meditators, and I have confidence you've answered this for yourselves already. So this is really just a reminder—as Steve mentioned last night—that we're doing this for the welfare of all beings. The freedom we hope to discover is not to be kept to ourselves, but to be shared and dedicated to the welfare of all beings.

There's a beautiful story of the conversion of King Ashoka. I don't know if you know this period of Indian history, but a couple of hundred years after the Buddha's death, Buddhism went through a golden age in India. This was about 250 BCE, 250 years before Christ.

And it was due to the conversion of a king who was a very ruthless and warlike ruler. He was standing on a battlefield after a victory his armies had won, surveying the bloody carnage of dead and injured bodies scattered across the field, and he was filled with remorse at the suffering he witnessed.

From one side, he saw a Buddhist monk walking through the dead bodies, through the carnage, crossing the battlefield. At that moment he was struck by the serenity of the monk—he could see the radiance, the peace and luminosity radiating from his face.

In that instant he reflected: "I have everything. I am the richest man in this country, and I am filled with remorse at what I have done. That monk has nothing, and he is radiant. What is going on here?"

Because of that encounter, he began to investigate the teachings of the Buddha. He became converted and completely transformed his kingdom. He stopped all wars and informed neighboring countries that he was no longer interested in invading them. He outlawed animal sacrifices throughout the land so that animals would be protected, and he distributed the wealth of the kingdom equitably so that everyone had enough to eat.

It became not only a golden age for people living there—who felt safe and prosperous universally—but he also became a great patron of the Dharma. There was a tremendous flowering of Buddhist schools and philosophies in that era, around 250 BCE. This was the impact of one person who had practiced to serenity. The influence of one monk walking across a field at the right moment opened up this vast transformation in society.

So I hope that part of your aspiration, as Steve spoke about last night, is returning to your life and being that one monk, that one nun for somebody. We never know where our ripples will reach. We never know who will be touched by whatever degree of freedom, compassion, or love we have cultivated.

I think it's important to remember this in our intention as we practice—that we are not practicing solely for ourselves, but there is a whole world out there that truly needs what you are developing, what you are bringing to fruition.

I want to close with a quotation from Shantideva, a ninth-century master in India. This is something I carry with me when I travel—a small traveling altar made by a member of the Spirit Rock Sangha. It contains a photograph of the Dalai Lama in the center and this quotation from Shantideva on the sides. The Dalai Lama says he is deeply moved by the teachings of Shantideva, so I would like to close with a reading from this passage, which is very close to the Dalai Lama's heart.

"May I be a guard for those who are protectorless, a guide for those who journey on the road. For those who wish to go across the water, may I be a boat, a raft, a bridge. May I be an isle for those who yearn for landfall, and a lamp for those who long for light. For those who need a resting place, a bed. For all who need a servant, may I be a slave.

Like the great earth and the other elements, enduring as the sky itself endures, for the boundless multitude of living beings, may I be the ground and vessel of their life. Thus, for every single thing that lives, in number like the boundless reaches of the sky, may I be their sustenance and nourishment until they pass beyond the bounds of suffering."

Let's sit together for a moment in silence.

For every single thing that lives, in number like the boundless reaches of the sky, may I be their sustenance and nourishment until they pass beyond the bounds of suffering.

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