Brahmavihāras and the Vicissitudes of Life

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 53:09

I wanted to talk tonight about the Brahmaviharas. It's a funny thing in a metta retreat—you know, in a vipassana retreat, we talk about all these different topics. But if somebody from the outside comes in and asks what are you talking about tonight, we say, "Metta." And if they ask what we're talking about the next night, "Metta." It doesn't vary very much on these retreats. So tonight I'll talk about the Brahmaviharas.

The person I was thinking about as I was getting ready for this talk is an Indian woman, an Eastern Indian woman from Bengal named Dīpamā. I know a number of you have heard of her. It's really interesting—sometimes people just hear her name and have a very strong connection with her. Especially for women, she's a really inspiring figure because she's one of the strongest women teachers to come out of Asia in our lifetimes.

I particularly want to recommend, if you're interested, a book on her life and her teachings called *Knee Deep in Grace*. It's a beautiful book with accounts of her biography, teaching stories from her, and some great photos. A lot of people use it as a devotional piece on their altar.

She was one of the most amazing yogis and individuals that I've had the chance to spend time with. On her first trip to the States, I got to live with her for a month in a house in the country in Massachusetts. I was cooking and driving her places and helping to look after her in that time. She had an amazing stability of mind, an amazing amount of love, and amazing presence. Her love was, as far as I could tell, unshakable. And she was always just giving it out—in the form of smiles, hugs, and blessings. She would just bless everywhere she went. Even when she got on the plane to come to America, she blessed the plane before it took off from Calcutta.

I never saw her mind waver. I never saw it slide into anything other than peace and kindness. And this was not always easy because she had brought with her to the States her daughter, whose name was Dīpā. Dīpamā just means Dīpā's mother—that's where she got her name, named for her daughter. And she brought Dīpā's five-year-old son named Rishi. Now Rishi at that time was a bit of a hellion. He was full of uncontainable and irresistible energy.

So we would take them out shopping, for example. We'd go into the shopping mall because they wanted to buy sheets and blankets and things to take back to India. Well, Rishi would cut loose from the pack and go running down the aisle, pulling clothes off hangers and reaching up to touch everything. Things would be cascading out into the aisle in his wake. And then Dīpamā would run after him to track him down and bring him back. All the time she was running, her little white robes would be billowing out behind her, and she just always had a little smile on her face. I never saw her get angry or impatient or at all

frustrated with Rishi. So I figured if she could do that with a five-year-old, she could do pretty well with adults, too.

Many people were struck by her presence of mind. She's been dead now for about ten years. At one retreat, people asked her, "What's in your mind? What's your experience like from the inside?" And she said, "There are only three things in my mind: peace, concentration, and metta." That's a pretty nice mind.

Meeting people like this is really inspiring because you get a sense of what's possible through practice. And I truly believe that people like Dīpamā get to be the way they are through practice. It's not an accident. I don't think it's because of their gene pool. I think it's because of years—or she would actually say lifetimes—of devotion to practice. She said that she was alive at the time of the Buddha in a past life and could actually remember hearing discourses from the mouth of the Buddha.

This reminded me of a poem by Mary Oliver about Stanley Kunitz, who was a neighbor of hers legendary for his garden. I want to read a bit of this poem:

"I used to imagine him coming from the house like Merlin, strolling with important gestures through the garden where everything grows so thickly, where birds sing, little snakes lie on the boughs, thinking of nothing but their own good lives, where petals float upward, their colors exploding, and trees open their moist pages of thunder. It has happened every summer for years. But now I know more about the great wheel of growth and decay and rebirth, and know my vision for a falsehood. Now I see him coming from the house. I see him on his knees, cutting away the diseased, the superfluous, coaxing the new, knowing that the hour of fulfillment is buried in years of patience, yet willing to labor like that on the mortal wheel. Oh, what good it does the heart to know it isn't magic."

The hour of fulfillment is buried in years of patience. This is our work. One week doesn't get the whole garden built, and one week doesn't get a heart reconstructed either. But hours of patience can.

This is really all that lies between us and someone like Dipa Ma—just doing the work of cultivating these beautiful qualities. I'm very grateful that in our tradition, the Brahmavihāras are our avenue to that kind of heart. We have a path that can take us from here to there.

Along the way, as we develop metta and compassion, it opens up all these beautiful qualities of heart as byproducts—qualities like happiness and joy and devotion and humor, wonder, awe, reverence, and gratitude. All these things are evoked by the different elements of the Brahmavihāra practice. All of them come to flower in us. These are really the qualities that, for me, make life sweet, make life rich and inherently satisfying and joyful.

Rumi said, "Someone who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives." So I'm very happy to see all of you have run toward the allure of love and happy that we've taken this trip together.

In thinking of going back either into the next stage of this retreat, or a vipassanā retreat, or going back into your daily life, what kinds of things can you take with you? I want to talk about that for just a minute.

First of all, I hope you have found some great tools to take with you. I hope the formal practices that we've done of all the Brahmavihāras as well as forgiveness are things that you've learned how to apply and work with and can take back into your daily life.

The second thing is no less important. It's really the spirit of loving-kindness—this ability to turn your attention anywhere and see that there's another human heart there that's also going through joys and sorrows and to have a sense of caring about that experience. This spirit, for me, has come alive over this week in our group here. I don't know how you felt it. Maybe sitting up front, I'm in a lucky position of getting to watch your faces brighten over the week, which they have. But I felt the temperature in the room kind of warm up over the week. I feel closer to you all, and I imagine you all feel closer to each other after this week.

That's the kind of spirit that you can help to find in the world or help to make in the world—a feeling of trust and openness. For us, I love this turning in the week when we come to the neutral person because that's really the person that opens the door to this. It's stepping beyond the people that we normally like and opening that caring to anyone and hopefully eventually to everyone.

Metta gets compared to, and I believe the word actually derives from, the word for rain in Pali, the ancient Indian language. Metta is said to be like a gentle rain that falls everywhere indiscriminately. It falls on the sidewalks, it falls on the roofs, it falls on the forest, it falls on the flower gardens—it falls everywhere. This is the indication of how our metta should be showered everywhere, indiscriminately falling like the gentle rain. This is the boundless or universal quality of it.

This inclination that we find we can develop can also be helped by some reflection. Here's one that the Buddha suggested we reflect on. This will only make sense if you can relate to the idea of rebirth that the Buddha talked about many times—that we are born over and over again. He said, given the countless lives that all of us have lived from time immemorial, it's not easy to find a being who at one point in those lifetimes has not been your mother, or your father, or your sister, or your brother, or your son, or your daughter.

What if that was true? What if looking around this room, everyone has been a blood kin of ours, a very close blood kin in another life? How would we feel about each other? It may depend how you feel about your family of origin, but nonetheless, I hope you see the potential. That could really change the way we look at people as we walk down the street.

This way of looking, this way of feeling opens our practice to all of life. It brings it all in into our meditation.

As we start to connect with people, we see that everybody basically wants the same things. Everybody

wants to be happy and not to suffer. Everybody wants to be safe. Everybody wants their body to be supported well and to be well fed. Everyone wants to live with ease. This is true of non-human beings as much as of human beings.

And then we start to wonder, especially on the human level, are we really so different? We have different external packaging, somewhat, but if you look closely, it's just variations on a theme. Two eyes, a nose, two ears, a mouth, arms and legs, and then there are lots of variations on that in terms of height and size and skin color and color of eyes and things like that. It's just variations on the same theme.

And then you look inside, and yes, there are different personalities. We all have different personalities, but it's just, again, mixes of the same components. Everybody's got love and joy and warmth, and everybody's got greed and dislikes and confusion—just different balance. And you start to realize that we spend so much time thinking about the ways we're different, and we could easily spend just as much time thinking about the ways we're alike. There are just as many ways we're alike, but we just don't turn our attention to that.

This is not just an accident. This is the trick of ego. Every being that lives plays this game in order to become separate. This is how we become separate. We play this game. We fasten on certain characteristics and we say, "Well, I'm attractive, so I'm special. Or I'm not attractive, so I'm special. I'm creative, so I'm special. Or I'm not creative, so I'm special." The ego does this to separate ourselves out.

Metta and the Brahmaviharas undercut this tendency of ego towards separation and focus on bringing into clear relief everything that we share. That's what comes to the forefront through the Brahmaviharas. That's what comes into clear focus and what we can give more attention to. It's actually more skillful to give more attention to that. We've been so focused for so long on the separation, we've gotten blinded by it. And we think that's the fundamental truth of things. In fact, this unity is more fundamental and in a way is more real than the differences.

This is from Rumi's teacher, a man named Shams of Tabriz: "I, you, he, she, we—in the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions." In the garden of the Brahmaviharas, also, these are not real distinctions.

So there are the tools that I hope you've found and will take home. There's the spirit of inclusion and non-separation of loving-kindness. The third thing is that I hope you've gotten a sense of the possibilities of the Brahmaviharas. What the Brahmaviharas really can show us is the way that an awakened heart can respond to life, and that capacity is within each one of us.

So as an example: loving-kindness sets the foundation of connection and caring. When suffering comes, there's the possibility of responding with compassion. When happiness comes, there's the possibility of responding with mudita. And when the heart rests, there's the possibility of holding all of that with balance, with equanimity. And I believe that each one of you has tasted all these flavors in this week and

seen that possibility.

So I just want to point out that in the world at large, this is rare. This is not usually the way things go. So instead of the spirit of metta and inclusion, there's more often the sense of withdrawing and separation. When unhappy things happen in our life, we're more apt to respond by getting depressed or discouraged rather than feeling compassion for ourselves. When good things happen in our life, we're more apt to respond by getting kind of carried away in claiming them or owning them or using them to build ourselves up instead of simply enjoying them in the moment, knowing that they'll pass. Mudita recognizes that joys and sorrows come and go and really appreciates joy when it's there.

These changing conditions of life happen for everyone—for fully enlightened beings like the Buddha, for ordinary people like us. In fact, the Buddha said there are eight conditions that come and go in the world all the time that affect us: gain and loss, pleasure and pain, praise and blame, success and failure.

These alternate for everyone, enlightened or unenlightened. The normal person meeting gain, pleasure, praise, or success tends to get puffed up with thinking about it and owning it. The normal person confronted by the others tends to get depressed, downcast. The Buddha said both these responses lose track of impermanence, that the conditions are going to change.

A wiser response is compassion and mudita, and then the equanimity that can hold that change. So I just encourage you to reflect on this as a possibility that you felt this week. There are different ways to respond to life's conditions, and you now know what they are. Putting them in practice, that's the life's work.

But a life's work isn't wasted if that response comes through. You may have heard this story that someone asked a Zen master, "What's the purpose of a lifetime of dharma practice?" The Zen master said, "An appropriate response." That sounds trivial, but that's what it comes down to. If we can make an appropriate response in the moment, that's the culmination of a lifetime of practice. And then do that moment after moment.

So I would just want to fill in a little bit on the other three brahmaviharas that we didn't talk as much about as we talked about metta. Compassion is said to be the trembling of the open heart in response to suffering. So it's interesting that for compassion to come out, there has to be the contact with seeing suffering, our own or another's. It's said in our tradition that suffering is the proximate cause for compassion. It's the trigger that touches it off. Without suffering, no ground for compassion to arise.

But you look around the world, there is a lot of suffering. You look around the world, there's not as much compassion. So somewhere that link isn't happening. Why is that? I think it's because so often all of us have ways of defending ourselves against all the suffering in the world—our own suffering, the suffering of our friends, the suffering of the society, the suffering of the globe. It seems too much for us.

Starting with our personal suffering, we find ways to turn away from it, to avoid feeling it. We escape

through sense pleasures. We escape through addictions, whether it's food, alcohol, drugs, sex, work, companionship, whatever. We find ways to go somewhere else when the suffering gets a little too close. Pick up some other source of pleasure. This blocks the connection of our heart with the suffering. And this is really where the problems start.

Freud said that neurosis is the refusal to suffer. So our core mix-up came because we couldn't open to the suffering that we encountered probably quite young in life—the absence of our mother or of our father, the breakdown of love, the feeling of not being connected or people not being there for us. And we turned away when we were really young into other forms.

So in getting back this connected heart, can we open to suffering without defending and without trying to move away from it? If so, that's really what ignites compassion for us. As we do that, we find we can let the heart get big enough to hold the pain. That's really what's happening with the development of compassion. The heart is just growing until it can wrap around a bigger amount of pain and be equanimous with it. That's why the equanimity is such an important factor in the overall development of the brahmaviharas.

Opening to suffering can really change us if we let it. It can transform our relationship. There's a story about the most famous Buddhist ruler in all of Indian history. His name was Asoka. He was a very warlike king who lived about 200 years after the death of the Buddha. He amassed a great army and went around conquering all the neighboring kingdoms, taking over their land, taking their wealth, destroying their armies in the process. He had just conquered a neighboring kingdom and laid waste to the army. The battlefield was just a bloody mass of carnage and dead bodies and blood. He was standing on a hill looking over the scene of the battle where he had won. And he became depressed. He said, "This is so ugly. This is what my life has come to."

This was the result of the culmination of his career. And then, in the middle of the battlefield, there was a Buddhist monk who was walking slowly and mindfully, very present, with an inner glow that somehow communicated itself to Asoka. Even in the midst of all the carnage, there was equanimity and a kind of radiance in the monk's being.

Asoka said, "What is going on? I have everything. I have all these riches, all this land, all these palaces, all the gold I could want, and I'm miserable. Here's someone who has nothing and they're radiant. What's happening?"

So he turned to investigate the teachings of the Dharma, and he came to understand. He became totally transformed as a ruler. He foreswore violence and sent emissaries around to all the neighboring kingdoms telling them he would no longer make war on them. He started to realize the importance of caring for his people, so he began to distribute food equally around the kingdom so that there was no poverty.

It's very interesting. The Buddha, when he talked about ways to rule, said that the start of the decline of society is when some people become poor. That's the very beginning of a society's decline. For a society to be healthy, everyone needs not to be poor. Asoka put that into effect. He stopped animal sacrifices, which was a common custom in India of those days, out of mercy for the lives of the animals. This brought in a golden age of growth of the Dharma in India under the benevolence of his rule. He's always held up as an example of a truly enlightened and noble ruler. This was all touched off by his opening to the suffering that he saw on the battlefield.

This opening can change us. It's not to say that compassion is always easy. I once did a ten-day compassion retreat similar to the seven-day retreat that we've done in loving kindness. It was one of the most difficult retreats I've ever done because my face was just up against suffering all day long for ten days. I spent a lot of time with my suffering person, as you probably did with your first compassion meditation. I was just contacting suffering hour after hour, day after day, for ten days in silence. It was the most difficult kind of practice I've ever done, but it really did sensitize me to the presence of suffering in my life and in others.

So it's not an easy practice, but there's also a kind of sweetness when it's true compassion. One of my teachers said, "Compassion is like the feeling at sunset. You come to the end of a beautiful day, the sun is going down, there's that warm golden light that starts to spread, and there's a little bit of sadness because the beautiful day is ending and the sun and the warmth are going away." That little bit of sadness is part of compassion because the heart's in touch with suffering. But there's also something sublime when the equanimity is there to support it—something sublime about it. This is the balance that you see in the statues of the Buddha and Quan Yin, where the equanimity is there to support the contact with the suffering.

The near enemy of compassion, where it slides into the unwholesome, is sometimes talked about as being pity. Sometimes it's talked about as being grief. The grief is in the sense that the heart's gotten overloaded by the suffering it's in contact with. It's too much to hold, so it gets pushed under. The equanimity is not strong enough to hold it, so the grief overwhelms us.

The pity is from a slightly different take. Pity comes from a place of looking down on the suffering. "Oh, their suffering—I'm glad that's not my problem," as though we're above the problem, or we're better off because we don't have that problem. That's the source of pity. Compassion sees as an equal.

There's a beautiful poem that expresses this sense that compassion is a recognition that we're all in the same boat. We're all subject to pain, emotional and physical. We're all suffering, subject to illness, aging, and death. There's a poem called "Kindness" by Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian-American poet:

"Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things. Feel the future dissolve in a moment, like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved, all this must go, so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness. Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the

road. You must see how this could be you, how he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive."

Before you know kindness is the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth. Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore, only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread. Only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say, it is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.

The phrase in this that really speaks to me is "until your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth." The size of the cloth is the size of life. All life is subject to sorrow. All life is grounds for kindness, for caring.

The practice of mudita is the beautiful complement to the compassion practice, opening to what's joyful in the world. This is a really happy practice, really upbeat. How do we respond to happiness? There's kind of a double dose of it. A friend called me on the phone a while ago, and I asked her, "How are you?" Just immediately, she burst out, "I'm wonderful!" Her tone of voice just picked me up so much that without thinking I said, "I'm wonderful too." I hadn't even thought about saying that, but I felt it in that moment. We can just get off on other people's happiness. Then there are two happinesses, double what there was before.

The Dalai Lama said, "If you can be happy with others' happiness, then your odds for happiness go up by six billion to one." That's a really good bet. I'll take those odds.

Take a look and see every time throughout the day when happiness strikes you—it could be in someone else, it could be yourself. Just here in this simple setting, how many times have you felt happy seeing the deer or the turkeys or the baby swallows? Or the sun coming out when the fog has lifted, or having a warm shower when you get up in the morning, or feeling how comfortable the bed is at night when you get to lie down at the end of a long day. Sometimes nature is a great source of joy.

Shortly after I was ordained, I stopped in at Chiang Mai before going on to a forest monastery where I spent a three-month retreat. I was very alone. There was a teacher there, but he didn't speak English and I didn't speak Thai. So I was practicing intensively, as we have been this week, for three months. I didn't have any dharma talks. I didn't have any interviews. There wasn't anybody else there who spoke English that I could talk to regularly. It was really quite a period of aloneness. It tested my resolve.

But what really sustained me was the beauty of the nature. The monastery was set at the bottom of a gorge between two big cliffs with a river running through it. The monks' huts were on one side, the nuns' huts were on the other. Every hut was beautiful, and because I was a visitor, they gave me the most beautiful hut. It was right up the river. I couldn't see another hut from my place. It was just an idyllic spot

for practice, but also kind of lonely. So I had that contrast. The beautiful thing was that nature really was my support, providing access to joy at that time.

Sometimes we have to look for the mudita in the situation. A few years ago, Sally and I got an infestation of skunks under our house. We live in Woodacre, a country town as you can probably tell. The skunks burrowed under the walls and got underneath the house in the winter because they didn't want to be out in the rain. We found out later they started to make a house for themselves by pulling out the insulation of our furnace pipes and building this nice little warm nest. They found the furnace was a good place to hang out, trampolining on it in the middle of the night. They often seemed to choose about two in the morning to spray. I don't know why, but they would spray about two in the morning. We'd be sleeping, and all of a sudden, this aroma would come up into the bedroom—that thick, oily scent of skunk.

And it would just start permeating everything. So it was not a nice situation. But even then, I have to say, I could take a moment and appreciate the dry home they had found for the winter. So I could actually connect with a little bit of mudita for the skunks. That was before we trapped them and relocated them to the state park further down the road where more of their natural home was found.

Mudita is sometimes translated as sympathetic joy. The sense is like the strings of a sitar. If you know what a sitar looks like, there are seven big strings on top and then nineteen little strings on the bottom that you don't pluck very much. You may run a finger across them, but you pluck the big strings. The little strings vibrate when the frequency is the same, and that's what gives the sitar its richness of sound. They're called the sympathetic strings of the sitar. They vibrate when their frequency is in tune with one of the big strings that gets plucked.

This is the way sympathetic joy works. Your string vibrates with happiness and my string resonates when it's on the same frequency. Now in that understanding of sympathetic joy, some teachers say you need the big string to resonate first. You need somebody outside yourself. You can't resonate your own string. So they say you can't practice mudita toward yourself. This is the understanding in the Visuddhimagga, if any of you read that—it's an old fifth century text. But actually the Buddha never said this. He never said mudita shouldn't be directed to ourselves.

So another way to translate it is appreciative joy. I actually prefer this—appreciative joy. Then we can direct the mudita to ourselves and feel that first string vibrate. And for me, the vibration of that first string is gratitude. When we direct the mudita to ourselves and we appreciate all the things that are right in our life, what comes through is the feeling of gratitude. We just become aware of all the blessings that are in our life.

All of us have lots of blessings. All of us here have lots of blessings. I know all of us are struggling with some difficulties also—some smaller, some great. But we also have lots of blessings: the blessing to be generally fed, clothed, and sheltered; the blessing of having heard the Dharma; the blessing of responding to the Dharma, having the leisure time to practice the Dharma and cultivate the heart. These are great

blessings that we all share.

When we tune into gratitude, it's a really lovely state of mind. I mean, if it couldn't be connected with mudita, then I think there should be a fifth Brahmavihara, which is gratitude, because it's such an elevated state of mind. When you think about it, when you're grateful, you appreciate all that you have, so you don't feel a need for more. You appreciate all that you have, so it takes you out of aversion. You're not discontent either. So it really forestalls both greed and aversion through the presence of gratitude.

One of our friends is a grandmother. She's quite a wise person and wanted to teach her granddaughter about this quality of gratitude. So she was talking to her granddaughter one Christmas day. The granddaughter was telling her about all the presents she'd gotten for Christmas, very excited. The girl was about six or seven at the time. And then her grandmother, this wise teacher, said, "Well, when you get lots of presents, do you feel thankful for what you have or do you want more?" And the little girl goes, "Oh, Nana, I'd like more."

The grandmother said, "Oh, that's too bad." And it kind of brought the little girl up short. She said, "Well, what do you mean by that?" And the grandmother said, "Well, haven't you noticed that when you feel content with what you've already got, that's a very good feeling? And when you want more, it doesn't feel as good inside." And the little girl said, "Oh, Nana, you're right. You're right."

So this is not rocket science.

But we often forget the joy of contentment through gratitude. It's a really beautiful state. It's also, according to the Buddha, a rare state. The Buddha said three persons are rare in this world: one is a Buddha, and one is a person who's thankful and grateful.

At one retreat, I was going into the autumn in New England. The days were getting really short. The weather was turning cold. All the leaves had fallen off the trees. That gray New England, miserable rainy season was starting to set in. And I was starting to get kind of bummed out. I'd come from California. I noticed my mind going into this aversive mode: Oh, I don't want to sit with this. It's too gloomy. I can't handle it.

So to cut off the aversion, I decided to do a gratitude practice on that retreat. I made a list of all the things in my life I was grateful for. It filled up a whole page. Then every morning when I'd wake up, I'd read that list. There were twenty-five things on there, and it just picked me up at the start of every day. It changed my outlook on the day and got me through that winter season. This can be a really wonderful practice—the conscious cultivation of appreciation for all our blessings.

I have a good friend who's in the financial management world. You know how the stock market crashed in 2001 and 2002? These were not good years for financial managers, because nobody was making money and most of them were losing a lot of money for their clients. Their clients were not very happy that year, especially in 2002. She said clients were just railing at her for having lost their money. One client

screamed at her, "You've ruined my life!"

So it was an intense year from a work situation. But she said, "You know what? This has been the happiest year of my life."

I said, "Are you kidding? Why?"

She said, "Because I've been practicing gratitude this year. And it's just cheered up every day of my year."

The last of the Brahma Viharas is equanimity, which we've mentioned a few times. It's really that balance of mind that can hold the ups and downs of life without being so disturbed by the changes.

The Dalai Lama is one of the most equanimous people I've ever met. I think I mentioned that he was in this hall teaching a few years ago with a group of Asian and Western teachers of Buddhism. The format—I don't think in the end this was the best format for us to use, but this is what we used—had different Western teachers presenting to him some of the topics and issues they were struggling with in growing the Dharma in the West, that their students were working with, that they were working with as teachers. Then they would ask the Dalai Lama to respond.

He'd get a few presentations and then be asked for a response. Sometimes he'd say a few words, sometimes he'd just bow to the person and not say much of anything. One time he was asked for a response and he said, "Oh, you know, nothing left up here. By the time the third person speaks, all the earlier thoughts are gone." He just laughed at himself.

But then one of the organizers asked him what I thought was a really direct and challenging question. It was the first time I'd heard the Dalai Lama being grilled in this way. This person said, "Your Holiness, a lot of us are concerned these days about the increasing popularity of Buddhism in the culture, with movies like Kundun and Richard Gere getting very famous. We're concerned that the Dharma is going to get watered down as it gets popularized in this culture. And you, Your Holiness, are the biggest popularizer of them all. What do you have to say about that?"

He was just quiet for a moment, reflecting. Then he answered, "Some people, you see, they call me a living Buddha. Other people, they call me the God King."

He said, "No, no, I am none of these. I'm just a simple Buddhist monk." He says this all the time. You may have heard him. And he really means it. "I'm just a simple Buddhist monk. But other people, they call me counter-revolutionary. They call me a wolf in monk's clothing. But you see, I look back at my own intention. And if my intention is sincere, then that's what's important. How I'm perceived is up to others. About that, I don't care."

He said that really emphatically. "I don't care." And I could tell he really meant it.

But here's someone in a great position of visibility, having praise and blame heaped on him all the time on

a global scale. The fate of the Tibetan people is resting on his shoulders, almost alone. He is the only person in the world today who has a hope of saving the Tibetan culture within Tibet itself. And he hears stories all the time about people being tortured and killed in that country. And yet, he can still laugh and he can still hold himself lightly and with that kind of balance of mind—an extraordinary capacity, extraordinary.

So developing the equanimity practice involves this challenging phrase in the traditional sense using karma. We've offered some alternatives. I thought of one more alternative tonight. For those of you who just aren't down with that karma thing, here's another equanimity phrase that I like: "Everything arises according to past causes and conditions."

This almost everyone can agree on. We don't have to spell out what the causes and conditions are. Everything arises according to past causes and conditions. That way we can open ourselves to the unfolding the way it's happening, the way it's actually happening, without having to blame it or justify it or question it. And in that, the purpose is we surrender. The equanimity practice is designed to allow us to surrender to the law of nature and to surrender to the Dharma. And it takes the individual kind of control out of it.

Of course, when we can act in the world to improve things, we do that. But when we're simply sitting quietly, can we come back to peace by taking out the individual struggle? And this is where the equanimity leads us.

Sometimes we think that the world is so crazy and complicated today, nobody could have had to deal with a world like this before. But the world was very crazy at the time of the Buddha also. You can read it in the history as it's recorded in these ancient texts.

The Buddha's first royal patron was a king named Bimbisara. He was very taken with the Buddha's teachings. He became a sponsor, gave the community a wonderful grove to spend their rains retreats in, provided them with meals and shelter, offered lots of great things to the Buddha and the community over many years. As his son grew up—who was a prince, his name was Ajatasattu—the prince got very envious to rule the kingdom. And so he started plotting to kill his father.

The father got wind of this and abdicated the throne to his son out of care, out of love for his son. He said, "You want to be ruler? The kingdom is yours." But the son wasn't satisfied. He put his father in a tower, first of all, but then found out his mother was feeding him, bringing him food illicitly. And so he killed his father.

And this is the kingdom the Buddha was living in. A jealous son kills the father who has been the Buddha's main royal supporter for all his years of community life. That's pretty crazy politics.

So what would you do if you're the Buddha in a situation like that? Finally, the son came to him for teachings, and the Buddha gave him Dharma teachings. The son converted and then really regretted the

deeds that he had done. So he was able to have an impact, but it took tremendous equanimity just to stay steady through that kind of change of fortune that affected the whole kingdom.

It's said actually that if the son had not killed his father,

When he received the teachings from the Buddha, he could have become enlightened. But because of the heavy weight of the transgression of killing his father, his heart couldn't open to the truth. And so he didn't gain that insight.

The development of equanimity through the Brahmaviharas is a wonderful gift of the practice. But when you think about how the Buddha stayed equanimous, how the Dalai Lama stays equanimous, there's another level happening as well—the level of insight. This is the real profound source of equanimity in our tradition. I just want to allude to it. This really fits more in the terrain of insight than the terrain of loving kindness, but of course, loving kindness opens the heart to insight. So it's not inappropriate to mention it now.

Enlightened people know a secret—one that mostly we don't. The secret is that in the middle of this bundle of suffering, there is no self who's getting impacted by that suffering. This is the teaching of the doctrine of not-self, or *anatta*, as it's called in the Pali.

There are only the body sensations, the emotions, the thoughts, the sense impressions, and the knowing of them. That's all a human being is. There is no little person in there who's being tormented by these things. The awakened ones say that when we actually see for ourselves the direct truth of this, it kind of takes the sting out of life. There's still pain, there's still pleasure, but seeing this takes the sting and some fundamental kind of fear out of life.

Jack Kornfield was visiting Sri Lanka in the early years shortly after he'd been a monk. He met with an old monk who was very jolly, very cheerful, living very simply in a hut with a simple bed. Jack went in to see him. The monk was sitting on his bed and asked, "What do you understand the essential message of the teachings to be?" And the monk just laughed and said, "No self, no problem. No self, no problem."

This is the secret that waits for us to discover—the freedom of knowing that takes away some big piece of the suffering of life. That's why it says in the *Visuddhimagga* that the awakened ones understand there is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. There is no one in there who's getting tormented by this suffering. The suffering is misunderstanding, essentially.

This is really the union of wisdom and compassion. The compassion that holds the suffering, but the wisdom to see nothing has fundamentally gone wrong. There's just a misunderstanding taking place. Nothing fundamentally has ever gone wrong. We are all fundamentally still safe. And that secret is just waiting for each of us to discover, to free our hearts even more.

This is the real source of the balance of equanimity and compassion in the Buddha, in Quan Yin, in the

bodhisattvas, in all the awakened beings. This is the potential of equanimity.

I'd like to close tonight with another expression of the Brahmaviharas from the Tibetan tradition. They also speak of these states, calling them the four immeasurables because all these states are considered to be boundless. They open our hearts up in a boundless way to all of life. What I appreciate about this expression from the Tibetan tradition is that it emphasizes the karmic nature of the path—that the path unfolds under the operation of the law of karma, that wholesome intentions lead to wholesome results.

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue.
May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue.
May all beings remain unseparated from the sacred happiness, which is free from sorrow.
May all beings come to rest in the great equanimity beyond attachment to those near and far.

Let's just sit for a minute, please.

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