An Appropriate Response

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 55:17

I wanted to start this evening by mentioning that a good friend of ours, someone known to many of you, was ordained today as a monk in Burma. Robert Cusick, who has been a manager here on many occasions, received ordination on his sixtieth birthday. In fact, looking over to that side of the room ten days ago, you would have expected to see Robert about where Mary is sitting today.

He was ordained with his teacher, whom he loves deeply, named Pao Sayadaw. When he left, he had the intention that he may be ordaining for the rest of his life. So Robert Cusick is no longer. His new name is Sunyata Gowesika, meaning "a seeker of emptiness." We wish him well. May he find emptiness and make it his home.

As you seek your own emptiness and prepare to go back into your daily life or continue into another retreat, I want to reflect on what you will take with you from this experience.

The first thing that comes to mind is that I hope you will carry the spirit of metta from here back into the world, because the world needs it. Primarily because it will make you happy, but also because we hope to create here at Spirit Rock a culture of loving kindness and generosity, a spirit of metta and dana, so that when people walk into the meditation hall or through the gates, they begin to feel that atmosphere immediately. That can be a seed for taking back into the world. I hope everybody felt that this week.

I've also reflected that life is really unpredictable and changeable. Basically, at any given moment, anything can happen to anyone, anywhere, anytime. This was starkly apparent last December 26th when the tsunami hit without warning. A good friend of ours was on the beach in South India, actually doing qigong, when this huge wave came up and knocked him over. As he was being washed out to sea, he managed to catch hold of a tree trunk, then climbed up on a concrete wall and held on as another big wave came in and out. He survived by hanging on to that tree. But it was terrifying. That was one place where non-clinging would not have been appropriate and would not have resulted in liberation.

Just a week ago, hundreds of people were on their way to work in London when bombs went off in the subway and on buses. Out of nowhere, lives were changed forever—people injured or killed, their families and loved ones devastated. These things come without warning. A simple visit to a doctor can bring a terminal diagnosis. You never know when this might be any of our fate.

Someone once asked a Zen master, "What's the value of a lifetime of practice?" The Zen master replied, "An appropriate response."

When I first heard that story, I thought it was rather wimpy. I was quite disappointed because Zen

masters are supposed to say much stronger things. They're supposed to say something like, "After a lifetime of practice, you can run me through with a sword and I won't blink an eye." That's the kind of statement I was looking for. "An appropriate response" sounds very humble.

But the more I've reflected on that statement, the more I feel it embraces the whole of our life and practice. Because what is practice other than finding the appropriate response to this present moment, again and again? That is the challenge practice presents, and that is where we establish these qualities of heart and mind: openness, mindfulness, wisdom, loving kindness, compassion. It's all about how we respond in this new moment.

I think one of the great gifts the Brahma Viharas offer us is a powerful set of tools for how to respond. It's not that through our meditation we stop difficulties from entering our lives. Even the Buddha couldn't do that. People tried to kill him. They sicced an enraged elephant on him in a narrow alleyway. He was poisoned. He faced a schism in the Sangha and a revolt by the bhikkhus. His name was tarnished, his reputation spread as that of a criminal and evil person. He had to deal with all of this difficulty too.

But having these tools means we don't have to feel like passive victims of what happens. We have ways to work with situations, ways to respond that help the mind deal with what's happening. I think this is very empowering.

It basically takes us out of a role of passivity and into a role of activity with wisdom.

So normally in life, I think for most of us, when something painful happens, we tend to get sad or we get angry. When something good happens, we tend to get elated and self-satisfied. And the Buddha said both these responses, both these extremes are not really based in wisdom because they ignore the truth of impermanence, that whatever that condition was, it's eventually going to pass. And in the end, he said, equanimity is a wiser response.

But the Brahmaviharas show us kind of a roadmap of what's possible for the human heart. And I'd say even more exactly, what's possible for the awakened heart. We start with this foundation of loving-kindness, this generalized caring mindset for everyone. And the world will certainly do many things to test that. The events of the larger society, the actions of political leaders, the actions of our own family members. It's going to be testing our ability to stay open again and again.

But I think what the Brahmaviharas say is just because the world is crazy, it doesn't mean that we have to be crazy, and that there's the possibility of staying sane and responding in a sane way, even as the world goes through all of its madness.

So when we start from the foundation of an open heart, from loving-kindness, when suffering arises, there's the possibility not of overwhelm or grief or despair or anger. There's the possibility of compassion—not something that comes easily or very quickly, but as we develop that practice, as we incline the mind in that way, it comes more and more easily and naturally.

When delightful things happen to us, there's the possibility not to cling and get kind of tripped out about them, but to meet them with an appreciative joy. We can appreciate, but we also understand the impermanence of the situation. And when there's nothing particular happening, when the heart can just rest, equanimity can hold all the ups and downs of life.

These are our possibilities, as Sally was pointing to last night.

On the subject of equanimity, somebody asked in a note after we did that meditation yesterday, "Well, what about the role of activism in the world? When we say that we accept this moment just as it is, we accept things just as they are, does that mean there's no role for social change, for righting injustices?"

Not at all.

Just as in our own meditation practice, what we really start to look at, what we focus on is how we respond to what is. The same principle applies in the world. In that first moment of the arising of something difficult—a pain, a grief, a loss, a fear—we can't change that arising. In Sylvia's words, the present moment could not possibly be any different than the way it is with all its complexity. But we have the choice then of how we meet that moment, which creates the next moment of the world.

So in our meditation practice, we put a lot of emphasis on responding to this arising, not with conflict, not with greed, not with aversion, because that destroys our peace and plunges us more into suffering. But learning the responses of mindfulness, of patience, of acceptance, of openness, of wisdom, of being willing to learn, and trying again and again to restore the heart to balance—then the action can be appropriate.

Same thing in the world. If our partner gets angry at us, if we see the desecration of the environment, if we see oppression of people, of cultures, of whole countries—can we stay somewhat composed within ourselves, accepting what is? And if so, I think that can be a wiser base for action than being all stirred up inside and reacting simply with anger, hatred, frustration, blame, and so on. So I think the same principle applies to action in the world as action in our meditation. Right action can come from a place of balance.

Sylvia talked about this retreat—I don't know if you remember because it was years ago now—but she started by talking about the Four Noble Truths and the crux of our whole practice being about suffering and the release from suffering. I want to kind of bring that context back because I think that it's important to hold our loving-kindness practice in that broader container and talk about how metta and mindfulness both work toward that container.

You know, usually vipassana is presented as our path to freedom, the wisdom path that liberates. And it's said that it can lead to a degree of freedom that is unshakable, complete, permanent, the very end of suffering. But this isn't often talked about, but in the texts, in the discourses of the Buddha, metta is also described as a deliverance of mind, or it could be translated as a deliverance of heart. And the word that's used, ceto-vimutti, translated as deliverance of mind, contains the word vimutti, which really means liberation—that the mind is actually liberated when it is in this very, very developed state of

loving-kindness.

So I want just to look back on our time here and see if we can all get a flavor of when our own hearts have been in that place of liberation over the course of this week. It's not a permanent liberation, it's not an unshakable liberation, but nonetheless, the word applied is liberation.

So I want to ask you to reflect back on a time when the three main pieces of your metta practice were sort of all clicking. And the three main pieces are your connection to the person, the phrase was with you, and the feeling—some feeling of metta, of caring, of warmth was there. So just turn in your mind back to some of the sittings or walkings during this week when all three of those experiences kind of came together. And perhaps you were able to sustain it for a little while. Thirty seconds, sixty seconds. What was that experience like?

"Anybody, what was the tone, what was the feeling like of that? Yes."

"The word that comes to mind for me is bliss."

Bliss, yes, thank you. It was what Sylvia was talking about with me the other night when she said we can finally open to wisdom. So openness, wisdom.

How else did it feel? Getting what you're wanting—satisfying, fulfilling, happy. What else?

Peaceful. Yes, the struggle goes out, doesn't it? The conflict goes out. What else?

Deep. There's a profound quality in the mind that has arrived at that kind of place. It's not an ordinary state.

Clear. Yes, you can see things as they are.

Warm and collected. That combines the metta quality and also the collected mind of composure. Denise?

Gratitude and joy. Yes, lovely.

All of you, I trust, have experienced something of this during the week. I want you to appreciate that this is not an ordinary state of mind. This is a very beautiful and noble way to be. It's not something that comes upon most people in their everyday life. It's something you put in a lot of work toward, and I hope you are happy about the fruits.

When you all respond, you are basically describing different aspects of the awakened heart and mind. The peace, the clarity, the bliss, the composure, the openness, the joy, the happiness—these are different aspects of being free. Freedom has a lot of different flavors.

In looking at that experience, I want to point out one thing that's extraordinary about it. When you have the connection to a person, it may take up the field of images—often it's through an image, at least sensing

the presence. When the phrases are going, your thoughts are occupied and other thoughts don't come in. Disturbing thoughts don't really intrude. And when the metta feeling is there, disturbing emotions don't really come in. While you're feeling that metta, the accompanying mood is happiness, joy, peace, composure—not anger, guilt, remorse, desire, fear.

See what came together in that moment. The images were stable. The thoughts were of your choosing and wholesome. And the feeling was that beautiful feeling of metta. In that moment you had basically put together thought, image, and emotion from your practice, and it was at that time under your control.

What else is there in the mind? That's it. If you look at mental events, it's basically thought, image, and emotion. And at that time you had put them all together into this total package that was satisfying, fulfilling, and free. Free because the unwholesome states couldn't intrude. It wasn't just an accidental moment. It was actually composed in that way.

This is why the developed state of metta is a kind of liberation. We step out of suffering in a very composed way at that time. Now you know how to do that. It doesn't mean you can do it every time. Still we're grateful and fortunate when they come together like that. Sometimes we just have the phrases. Sometimes we just have the image. Sometimes we just have the feeling. But you know that at times you've experienced that degree of freedom and completeness. That's an extraordinary thing.

This mind that is imbued with loving kindness doesn't tend to harm. It doesn't tend to harm ourselves, and it doesn't tend to harm others. This is a beautiful contribution to the world. People are safe when we're in a space of loving-kindness. We give that safety to the world.

The Buddha talked about this as an act of generosity—that the very ability to be in the world without harming others is an act of great generosity. Beings feel safe and protected in that space. So it's always interesting to wonder: what's the possibility? How far can that non-harming be developed?

I've just finished reading this quite charming little book about the Dalai Lama called *The Wisdom of Forgiveness*. A reporter hangs out with him and travels with him for a couple of months, then writes up the Dalai Lama's life in a more intimate way than we usually get to hear.

At one point, he had seen the Dalai Lama do this confession that Buddhist monks do every two weeks. Every two weeks they sit down with another bhikkhu and confess the ways they've transgressed the rules in the past two weeks. So the reporter asked him, "Did you also make confessions?" And the Dalai Lama said, "Of course I did."

The reporter said, "What did you confess?"

The Dalai Lama said, "Eating biscuits in the evening. As a Buddhist monk, I'm not supposed to eat anything after my midday meal."

Wouldn't that be nice—to live for two weeks and that was your greatest transgression? That's a really

non-harming mind.

I also mentioned the other night that Oprah interviewed His Holiness in 2001, and the interview appeared in O Magazine. This book has a little longer account of the interview. The hour-long interview began well. Oprah started by asking the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "An insect. Hmm. Okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

Oprah continued, "And that's it? In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued: "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a good life. That's a great life—to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators—even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind—I don't lag too far behind."

That's the Dalai Lama, and then here's us. I figure the only thing that separates us is about sixteen lifetimes of practice, so we're getting there.

It's also said that the mind that's imbued with loving kindness can't easily be harmed. It doesn't harm others, but it's also said it's not easily harmed, because when anger is directed at a mind filled with loving kindness, it doesn't stick. It's said that a mind filled with loving kindness is so spacious that it's like throwing a bucket of paint through space—it doesn't adhere anywhere in the space. So it's not so easy to be harmed with this mind of loving kindness.

We start practicing vipassana practice. Perhaps we start practicing metta and then we take up vipassana, and they seem like they're really different tracks. They seem like they're going in opposite directions. One's very receptive, present-moment oriented. One's very active, focusing on one particular quality of mind. We may think: what do these two have to do with each other?

But I really trust—and I believe from experience—that they come together in us in what I would call a foundation of character that is about having a warm attention. I think what we're trying to develop is a way of being present that's suffused with the warm quality of loving kindness.

Not a way of being present that's just a cold, clinical, detached, scientific observation, but one that's really warm toward the arisings of life, inviting, welcoming, receptive.

Ajahn Jamin is a Thai monk who teaches here, and he's an extraordinary being. He has practiced both Vipassana and loving-kindness to great depth. One of the things he says is that he hasn't had anger in 25 years. When you're around him, he has this joyful quality, and you really can't tell if the absence of anger came from his Vipassana practice and deep insight, or if it came from his metta practice and the openness of his heart. The two have merged in him.

He has one teaching. He doesn't teach in English—he teaches in Thai with a translator—but he has one English teaching that transmits his message. He'll touch the air in front of him and say, "Empty, empty," and then, "Happy, happy. Empty, empty, happy, happy." That's the whole transmission of his being: this union of emptiness where the mind isn't clouded with preoccupations about past or future, and the natural joy that comes from that.

We could say that Vipassana practice opens up spaciousness inside us, revealing the great openness that is our basic nature. Our fundamental nature is open—not jammed up or caught or stuck or clung or obstructed. This great openness is what insight practice reveals.

As we develop the heart, that openness takes on not a cold, vacant, absent, blank quality, but the warmth of loving kindness. This becomes a beautiful place to dwell. That's why these states are called the divine abidings—the Brahma Viharas. The emptiness brings peace; the metta brings that sense of warmth and invitation.

One person who came for an interview today was talking about discovering this combination through this week's practice. I'm sure he wouldn't mind my sharing—he began the week rather skeptical. In early interviews, he expressed a partiality toward Vipassana practice and some doubt about metta. Today he said, "Wow, I've had such great experiences with the metta and the composure of mind that comes from it. I realize it's just another way home."

The Dalai Lama put it beautifully: "Emptiness makes things soft. Compassion gives them a new shape." That's an unusual way to think of emptiness, but it does soften things. When you realize the world isn't as rigid or fixed or solid as you once thought, your eyes relax and everything can go a little blurry. Emptiness makes it soft; compassion gives it a new shape—or let's say a color or texture—and that's that warmth. When the Dalai Lama says compassion, we would say metta; they're more or less interchangeable.

Let's talk about the qualities of compassion and appreciative joy for a bit. I think compassion became central in the Mahayana tradition because of its affinity with the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths, the Buddha's core teaching, are all about suffering and the end of suffering, and compassion relates so closely to suffering. That's why it became so important.

In the Theravada tradition, we view compassion and mudita as complementary—one relating to difficulty,

one relating to pleasure—with metta as the envelope that includes them both. It's a slightly different emphasis, that's all.

I think it's a very big question, one I hope won't be answered intellectually but through our own investigation: How do we relate to all the suffering we experience? The suffering in our lives, the suffering in the lives of people we know, the suffering we hear about in the world and read about in the news. How do we relate? Another way of asking: What is our response to that suffering?

I did ten days of compassion practice on one long Brahma Vihara retreat. As you've done seven days of metta practice, I did ten days of intensive compassion, repeating compassion phrases all day long to a range of individuals. I also did ten days of mudita and ten days of equanimity. I found compassion the hardest of all four Brahma Viharas because I was touching into suffering all day, every day. With metta, I could be upbeat about people.

With the mudita, I got very happy about people, and the equanimity was just cooling out. But the compassion required me to keep touching suffering over and over and over again, and there was no escape for ten days. I found that difficult.

Freud, in constructing his theories of the human psyche, said that human neurosis is the refusal to suffer. That all our distortions of personality come from our unwillingness to experience directly and accept our own suffering. That's a really powerful statement. It might be true.

So I started to look at the ways that habitually I tend to relate to suffering. I see that it's not an easy thing to be with, and so I've developed a number of defense mechanisms. I might avoid it. I might deny it. I might try to fix it—this is a common male response. If you read the Mars and Venus material, the women are there to empathize, while the men want to go in with "Oh, you got a problem? Let me tell you how to get rid of that." This comes from our own discomfort with just being with the suffering.

We assign blame: "Oh, well, somebody did that to me. It's somebody else's fault." Or judge it: "I'm wrong for having this suffering," or "Someone else is wrong for having their suffering." We make up stories about it: "Well, that's what happens when you do this," or "It's your karma," or something like that. And getting angry—these are all ways we defend against just experiencing the basic fact of suffering.

Suffering is the proximate cause of compassion. So in order for compassion to wake up in us, we have to be willing to feel the suffering without turning away or defending against it. This is an interesting place to look: How do we respond when we're in the presence of suffering?

When the heart is open and can just be with it without moving into any of these defense mechanisms, compassion is the natural response. It's the natural response of the heart—it's not artificial, it's natural. And as we develop that ability, what happens is—this is the way it feels—the heart has to get bigger in order to hold it. So compassion is actually a great practice for making the heart grow.

I see this through my own meditation practice again and again. The more I'm able to open to my own difficulty with real acceptance—not pushing away, but real acceptance—the more I'm able to open to other people's suffering and the suffering that's in the world. Opening to suffering can change us if we let it. This power of compassion is really transformative.

Again, I feel like a kindergartner in working with this stuff. There was a Tibetan lama in the nineteenth century named Patrul Rinpoche. One day every year in the middle of summer, he would be doing his retreat out in the wilderness in some area of Tibet. In summer, the forests are blooming and the grasses are up, and of course there's lots of wildlife that comes out during the summer. So one day every summer, he would take off all his clothes and go out into the woods and lie down in the forest, staying there all day to let the insects feed on him. He would walk back into the retreat hut or monastery at night with his eyes all puffed up, big red welts all over his body, itching and in pain, could hardly see. That was his compassion for the beings who needed food that day.

That's a little beyond me.

My practice of compassion isn't there yet, but I like to reflect that this is a human potential that someone has achieved. Someone is out there.

There's another beautiful story about a king in India who lived a couple of hundred years after the Buddha—King Asoka. He was one of the greatest kings that ever lived, but he started off as a very violent ruler. He inherited the kingdom from his father and had expansionist aims, so he went around conquering neighboring kingdoms with his strong army, taking over much of India.

One day after a certain battle, he was standing above the battlefield looking down at the carnage—dead bodies everywhere, wounded people with arrows and spears, in various states of being cut up and mutilated. As he was looking over this scene, suddenly his heart responded to it. Not his conquering mind, but something deeper. He thought, "What am I doing?"

As he contemplated this and felt the horror of it, he saw a monk walking across the battlefield—just a Buddhist monk traveling from one part of the country to another who happened to cross the scene. He said the monk was so composed and peaceful, even radiant in the midst of this horrible scene, that his mind shifted within him. He went to seek teachings and converted to Buddhism.

He renounced any warring ambitions. He sent envoys to all the neighboring kingdoms saying, "I'm not going to try and conquer any longer. I'm giving up this tendency of acquisition." He outlawed animal sacrifices within the kingdom, which was a common Hindu practice at the time, and turned mostly to vegetarianism in his own kitchen. He also made it standard policy throughout the kingdom to distribute food, essentially ending poverty within his reign.

This aligns with a teaching you'll read in the Buddha's suttas. When asked what makes a society go bad, the Buddha said it begins when there is poverty in the land. It's the duty of a ruler to ensure that poverty

does not happen, because when poverty grows, people in need will turn to crime to satisfy their needs.

Asoka ushered in a golden age, not only for India but also for Buddhism, because he became a devoted patron of the religion. Buddhism came to great flowering under his leadership, all because of this opening of compassion and the sight of a different way to approach life.

I think it's helpful to remember that compassion isn't a state of suffering. When we're in touch with suffering and we ourselves fall into suffering, that's considered a near enemy. Sometimes it's described as grief—I'd describe it as overwhelm. We get overwhelmed by the amount of suffering we're in touch with, and that is a state of suffering. But true compassion can hold that suffering because it's supported by equanimity and doesn't tip into the near enemy.

Another way the near enemy shows up is described as pity. Pity is when we're in communication with someone who's suffering, and we feel ourselves by nature above it, better than that, beyond that. It's like, "Oh, you're so unfortunate that you're suffering, but I'm in a great place—I'm not suffering, and it's intrinsically because I'm a better person." That kind of looking down on suffering is called pity in this tradition, and it's also a near enemy of compassion.

The way to cut through pity—not so much with equanimity—is by realizing we could be in the same boat if circumstances were just turned a little bit.

There's a lovely poem by Naomi Shihab Nye that expresses this. It's called "Kindness":

"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 as 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."

"You catch the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth." The size of the cloth is everybody, every being. That's the scope for compassion.

When things get really overwhelming in the world, it seems to me compassion is the safest place to land. I feel this every time our country goes to war. I can get roused about that like a lot of us can.

can get upset and blaming, but somehow it never seems to do any good for me or the people I talk to. And a safer resting point for me feels to be compassion. I look at the suffering of the people who are in the war, I look at the suffering of the people who are perpetrating the war, who are the victims as well, and compassion is appropriate all around.

The next of the Brahmaviharas is mudita, sometimes translated as sympathetic joy. I actually like the translation appreciative joy. This can be a very happy practice, and I hope you felt some of that in doing the mudita practice—the response of the heart to happiness and taking joy in somebody else's happiness.

I got a call from a friend a while ago and just said, "How are you?" The friend said, "I'm wonderful." Just as she said that, my heart picked up, and without thinking about it, I said, "I'm wonderful too." Of course, part of it is because I was wonderful because she was wonderful. This is the flavor of mudita, and it's a double hit of happiness. There's the other person's happiness, which is great, and then there's our happiness in response, which is also wonderful. So it's happiness squared.

The happiness doesn't necessarily have to be what makes us happy. Last fall, when the Boston Red Sox were playing in the World Series, one of the cooks on staff here was a guy from Boston, and he wore his Red Sox jacket every day for a month. Then especially after they won for the first time in eighty-six years, he was so happy. I just got a high off of his high.

Sally is a horse lover. When we bought this land, we inherited an old quarter horse named Bob—a good name for an old quarter horse who used to work this land when it was leased for cattle ranching. Bob had herded cattle all up and down these hills. When we bought the property, he was probably twenty-five and was put out to pasture in that front pasture where you see the horses today. Bob's no longer here.

Sally, because of an affinity for horses, sort of took over Bob's care. In winter mornings, she would go down at seven or eight to feed him, and she'd have to break through the ice in the horse trough and tromp through the mud and the muck in that field to bring him his hay and his grain. Every time she'd go out, she'd dress up in her wellingtons and her worst clothes, and she'd come back mucked up. I'd think, "Oh, what a drag." But it didn't seem like it was a drag for her because she actually loved Bob, even though he was a cantankerous, old, hard-to-catch, uncooperative, independent, rebellious spirit.

So it may not be what makes us happy, but it may be what makes somebody else happy. And that's the important thing. But it also is sort of a doorway into our own happiness.

I think about in an environment like this, there are so many moments every day that bring out that kind of happiness. You walk out in the morning and see the first sunlight on the hills. You watch a deer go by with the babies that still have the spots on them. You walk into the dining room at lunch and see that incredible spread, that visual feast and the olfactory feast that the cooks have laid out. Then there's always

the wonderful feeling of lying down in bed at night after a day of retreat practice. I don't know if there's anything that matches it. It feels so good. So appreciating all our delights through the day.

The term mudita is sometimes translated as sympathetic joy, and that's because sometimes our happiness arises in sympathy with others. But under that translation, sometimes we're advised not to focus on our own joy because it's only supposed to be about resonating with others. But I like to call it appreciative joy so that you can also appreciate when your joy arises.

When you start to focus on the arising of your joy, part of the flavor that comes through is gratitude. This is a word that I heard a lot today. People were expressing their appreciation for the practice, for what they've learned in this week, for the support that the silence has given them. Gratitude is such a beautiful state to be aware of and even to cultivate. It's beautiful because it avoids the swings of desire and aversion. When you're feeling grateful, you're not in aversion because you're appreciative of what you've got, but you're also not necessarily wanting a lot more because you're appreciating what you've got. So it's really a place of contentment and rest.

Practicing in Burma last summer as a monk, I had the opportunity every day to feel that gratitude. Burma is one of the poorest countries in the world. I don't know how far down the list it is, but it's way down the list. The military dictatorship has ruined the economy. People are really poor. Yet a friend asked me to take some money to give to the monastery as a gift, and I thought it would be nice to offer some meals.

When I arrived at the start of the rains retreat—the traditional three-month retreat during the rainy season—I went to the monastery office before ordaining and said, "I want to offer this money, and I'd like to buy at least one or maybe two lunches. I'd like to feed the whole monastery." The monastery at that time housed 750 people: about 400 monks and a couple hundred nuns.

"I'd like to feed the whole monastery lunch with this donation from a friend in the U.S.," I told them. They replied, "Oh, I'm sorry. All the lunches are already paid for for the next three months." Mostly it was Burmese people who so appreciated the opportunity to support practitioners that they had lined up to offer meals. This wasn't a small amount—I think a lunch cost something like $350 or $400, and they were all spoken for through the entire three-month retreat.

Every day when I'd go down and see these huge piles of food with the donor's name written on a whiteboard above the tables, I'd feel this incredible debt of appreciation. The only way I could repay it was by being a good monk and practicing well. It was really a beautiful part of each day.

If you feel drawn to cultivate this quality of gratitude, I really encourage it. During one retreat, I decided to practice with it specifically. At the start of the retreat, I took out a sheet of paper and wrote down everything in my life I was grateful for. Then every morning when I got up, I read that first thing—before I went out of the room, before I sat, before I did anything. I'd read my gratitude phrases, and it started me off in such a positive way, with such a positive attitude toward the day.

We were discussing gratitude in a senior student class that Sally and I led, and one of the men had developed a beautiful practice with a friend. Every night before bed, he and his friend would email each other one thing they were grateful for that day. He really enjoyed it, and it spread through the class—several other people started doing it too. I think Sylvia was doing that for a while. Still are? Good practice? Lovely practice indeed.

This is a wonderful way into gratitude practice and the cultivation of joy.

These, then, are the possible responses of the awakened heart—the liberated heart, the peaceful heart—to all the changing circumstances of life. Metta is our general approach. Can we approach the whole world with that spirit of trust and openness that we develop here? When difficulties arise, can we think about turning to compassion instead of anger, blame, or despair? And when the happiness of the world presents itself, can we really tune into it and let our hearts light up?

All of this becomes more and more possible as equanimity of mind—the balance of mind—develops and allows us not to feel so disturbed or threatened by life's changes.

I want to return at the end to this question of appropriate response. The Zen master's reply that the value of a lifetime of practice is an appropriate response. The Dalai Lama is usually quite good at appropriate response, so I want to read you a bit more of that interview with Oprah as it continues.

The Dalai Lama had been talking about his meditation practice when Oprah asked, "Would you encourage the rest of the world to meditate?"

"Stupid question," the Dalai Lama replied immediately and unexpectedly. He's nothing if not honest. Oprah's face froze. There was stunned silence in the hotel room. One thought crossed everyone's mind: this was probably the first time anyone had ever said this to Oprah's face.

The Dalai Lama grew thoughtful. "Should people meditate? I think so," he said after a pause. "It is worthwhile for the world to look more inward. We are not doing enough here. I'm not saying that people should be religious-minded. What I'm saying is we should focus more on our inner potential."

"Oh, I believe that," Oprah said, visibly relaxing. "That's why I asked the stupid question."

Everyone in the room cracked up.

"I wanted you to say it, but I certainly believe that." So that was a very gracious response from Oprah to the Dalai Lama's bluntness. I appreciate both of them as appropriate responses.

We should focus more on our inner potential. And I think that's what you all have dedicated this week to. I really appreciate your hard work. And just to say that I believe strongly that this path operates on laws of nature just as fixed as the law of gravity. As you apply yourself to the path and to these good intentions of the Brahmaviharas and presence and wisdom, that will bear beautiful fruit in your life.

I want to close with a reading from the Tibetan version of the four Brahmaviharas. They're called the four immeasurables in that tradition because they're boundless states of mind. So these are the expressions of the Brahmaviharas in Tibetan practice:

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 moment.

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.

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