Right Attitude

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 31:28

In many ways, discovering the quality of right attitude as you approach your meditation practice is more important than the particular meditation technique you end up working with, or the range of techniques you work with. So I want to talk this evening about this quality of right attitude—how to investigate it, how to learn about it as you go, in a really simple and practical way.

One of the traits of Buddhist meditation lineages is that they can lend themselves to a strong quality of striving. Throughout all the Buddhist traditions, there is this magnificent concept of enlightenment. Sometimes when people come into the actual practice, they become focused on this outcome in a rather exclusive way. That focus tends to dominate why we're here, why we're doing what we're doing, and influences every moment along the path. It's as though one had come in carrying a banner that says, "Enlightenment or Bust." And sometimes busting happens before enlightenment happens.

I have to say, without a certain amount of fire, the path doesn't unfold so well. A certain amount of this quality, which we might call *dhammachanda*, or a fervor for the Dharma and for discovery, really needs to be there. Yet if it's not balanced with a sense of patience and trust in the unfolding, it can make us really tight in practice. And then that doesn't help the flowering so much.

I've been subject to some of this myself. Living in California, one is obligated to try other approaches from time to time. About ten years ago, I went to a psychic in San Francisco who had gotten rave reviews from my friends. If you're in meditation circles in California, you're also in all these other circles. I went to see this man named Manfred—perhaps some of you know him. As soon as I walked through the door, he said, "Whoa. You're trying way too hard." I don't know if it was my aura or what. He said, "Don't you know that God more likely shows himself to people who don't want him too much?" I thought that was actually, for me, a very apt comment. So I've had to work over the years of practice with a sense of striving, with a focus on the outcome, not to become fixated on the end result of practice.

On the other hand, if one lets go of that *dhammachanda*, that real fervor for the Dharma, then a meditation retreat can become too loose a place. Here you're very much on your own for a lot of the day, and someone might come into a retreat and say, "Oh, three good meals a day and a room of my own. I think I'll sleep for a week, and then if I have a single pain in my knee, I'll get up and leave the hall." Of course, it takes more determination than that to work with all the ups and downs of an intensive retreat.

Somewhere in the middle is a place where we can practice where we're really engaged and really motivated, but we're not putting extra pressure on ourselves. That kind of approach to meditation is what we're looking for in the quality of right attitude.

One Vipassana teacher summed up his approach to right attitude in three words. He said the key is to relax, observe, and accept. This is a very good reminder if you want to remember over and over the pointing of right attitude. These are three good words to bring to mind.

We begin with relaxation. Relaxation is not something that we come to after years and years of striving as a goal—we start with relaxation. I will encourage you all, and you'll probably hear it in the instructions many times: as you begin a period of sitting or as you begin a period of walking, see if you can find in your body and in your mind that quality of relaxation. It's not always easy, and you may not always be able to find it, but at least you can incline your practice in that direction.

One of Suzuki Roshi's early comments when he was teaching at San Francisco Zen Center was that we Westerners know how to relax our bodies, but we don't know how to relax our minds. That was one of the things his meditation was meant to teach.

When we relax our body at the beginning of a sitting, it sends a strong message to our brain, somehow to our subconscious, saying that I can relax here and now. Maybe it's through taking a few deep breaths. Maybe it's just through the sense of letting the mind fall into the body. We send the message to our whole nervous system that everything is okay, that it's safe to be calm, that nothing has to change, that things are all right just the way they are.

This is really the ground we want to have in our meditation—the sense that everything is okay the way it is, that the moment is fine the way it is. This is the basis for the quality of trust or faith. In Pali, the word is *saddhā*. It's the first of the five spiritual faculties. We begin with that sense that things are okay the way they are. We remember that they may not be perfect. They may not be exalted. But they may be good enough. In fact, maybe this moment is good enough the way it is. And that means good enough is a basis for us to start meditating.

So the second piece of meditation in this threefold description is observe. Once we're in the place of relaxation, then we simply want to notice: What's happening? And if we can notice what's happening, we're meditating.

This is the activity of waking up. In this moment, we want to be awake. This means that we're not particularly trying to figure out what's happening to us. We're not thinking about the past or the future. We're not trying to analyze how it came about that our stomach feels a certain way this morning. We're just observing. We're just noticing what the expression of life is in this moment.

And of course, this is the activity of mindfulness. Whether we're observing our breath, our body, emotions, sounds, passing thoughts, or visual sights is not so important. What's important is that awake quality of knowing this present moment.

The beauty of observing is that it starts to open the door to understanding. Another way to say it is that mindfulness is the entry point for wisdom. As we start to see the way things come and go, the way things

arise and pass in our body, in our mind, in the external environment—and we look closely—we start to learn the laws of nature. We start to learn the laws of the Dharma. And the only way to become free is to understand the way our own mind works.

So this quality of close observation is the first step to understanding. And in Buddhism generally, understanding is the highest value. It's only understanding that can lead to freedom and the end of suffering. This observation, the quality of mindfulness, is the direct route to understanding.

Then the third part is acceptance. This links back into relaxation, and it says: Whatever's happening in my mind and body and in the environment right now, I accept it. I don't struggle with it. I don't fight. I'm not in conflict. I can find inner peace right here and right now through this quality of acceptance.

And as you know, that's not easy to do. There are so many times that we don't want what's happening to be happening. We want something else to be happening. And so we go back and forth—accepting and opening, and then it's not quite right. This is where, again, we can watch the attitude, the play of attitude. The attitude of acceptance brings us into peace. The attitude of non-acceptance, of wanting something else, brings us into conflict, and suffering is born.

Sally and Sharda and I flew here yesterday and got in last night, and Sally and I brought our cat with us. Our cat is sixteen years old and had brain surgery last year, so we didn't feel that we wanted to leave her with a house sitter who didn't know her. We brought the cat, and IMS graciously offered to put her up along with us here.

I don't know if you've taken a pet on an airplane, but it's not a pleasant ordeal for the animal. We had her in a carrier, and she was squawking the whole time—going through check-in, going through security, lining up at boarding for the airplane. When we got on the plane, we put her under the seat in front of us, and she just kept squawking the whole time.

Once we got in the air, we took her out of the carrier, held her on our laps, and she calmed right down. She went to sleep and was just very mellow for most of the journey.

Then partway across the country—I don't know, it was probably around Chicago or something—a flight attendant came down the aisle and said, "I'm sorry, but FAA regulations do not allow pets to be outside of their carrier. You're going to have to put her back in her carrier right now."

So I saw my mind start to go back and forth between acceptance and fighting. Acceptance and fighting. We had a few words of discussion, and then Sharda kindly picked the discussion up and took it further with her. At one point I remember Sharda saying, "So now you've told us the FAA regulation, it's up to us to make our choice."

The flight attendant said, "It is definitely not up to you to make your choice. You have to comply with the FAA regulation."

Here I'm going, wait a minute—this doesn't make sense. She's on our lap. She's not disturbing anybody. She's really happy. She's not crying. She's going to sleep.

If we put her back in her carrier, she's going to start squawking and everybody else is going to get upset. But you know how there are some people whose mind is all about the regulation, and the specific situation really doesn't matter? This was one of those people.

So in the end, I could either feel angry and upset with her—which I did—or I could feel understanding that this is simply the way her mind relates to regulation. And I couldn't argue, because it's also an article of law that you have to obey the flight attendants. If I resist, I could be arrested in Boston, and I wouldn't be here with you tonight. So I thought, it's probably better if I'm with you tonight.

We put the cat back in the carrier, and she squawked for the whole rest of the journey. She cried, and everybody around could hear her. In fact, a woman a few aisles back said, "Yeah, I heard your cat crying toward the end of the trip."

But for me, the interesting thing was—apart from caring about her experience—watching my mind go back and forth between resistance and judgment, understanding and compassion. Resistance and understanding. I wanted to argue, and then the other side would come up, and I just couldn't take it any further.

So often this same dynamic happens in relation to body pain or knee pain or an unpleasant emotion. We can open to it for a moment and really accept it and feel it and understand it, and then it persists and we're back in resistance. It's a very interesting place to observe: where is there suffering and where is there peace or ease? You can examine this on an ongoing basis.

We start to see that we have in all our human minds a very deeply conditioned habit of making things right—in fact, of making things perfect in the moment, because we don't want anything to be painful. This human tendency to constantly keep adjusting ourselves and the environment to make it just right is described by the Tibetans as the essence of samsara. They say the very essence of the mental movement that keeps us on the wheel—being born and dying, arising into suffering over and over and over—is the act of correcting.

This is a very profound statement, pointing to this movement of acceptance. And you could say that the whole of our practice is noticing this quality moment after moment after moment.

So how do we correct? There are two fundamental ways, of course, which you know. One is we try to make things pleasant, and the second is we try to make the unpleasant disappear. One expresses itself through the activity of greed or wanting things a certain way. And the flip side of that coin is wanting to push away the things that don't conform to that—the fundamental movements of liking and disliking.

If we look for the phrase "right attitude" in the teachings of the Buddha, the place it seems most closely

linked is in the second factor of the Eightfold Path: sammā saṅkappa. This is often translated as "right thought" or "right intention," but I think "right attitude" is also a valid aspect of sammā saṅkappa.

Right intention is defined in the suttas as the intention of renunciation, of non-ill will, of non-cruelty.

Take a look at renunciation. A synonym often used by the Buddha is relinquishment. Renunciation and relinquishment point to the same thing—basically, in our modern vernacular, letting go. Letting go of something we would want to hold on to. Generosity is another expression of this same movement; generosity is a form of relinquishment or letting go also. So the first intention is letting go of what is pleasant, appealing, lovely, desirable.

The second and third aspects—non-ill will and non-cruelty—are both expressions of the mind state of aversion, stated in the negative. Non-ill will is the expression of mettā. Non-cruelty is the expression of compassion. These basically point to mettā and compassion, summing up the intention not to react with aversion.

So the heart of right intention is not being greedy and not being aversive.

If you want to refine it a little more, when the Buddha talks about action and kamma, he speaks of the roots of what's wholesome and the roots of what's unwholesome. He says: What is the root of the wholesome? Non-greed is a root of the wholesome. Non-hate is a root of the wholesome. Non-delusion is a root of the wholesome.

When you put these together, it basically restates non-greed and non-aversion, adding non-delusion. These three together can become the core of how we look at right attitude.

And I want to suggest that there's a really simple way to apply this teaching in any moment of your meditation practice.

If you're sitting, walking, in the dining room, wherever you are, you can check your mental attitude by asking three questions: Am I wanting something to happen? Am I resisting something that's happening? Am I not knowing what's happening?

If the answer to the first question is yes—bingo, you've got greed. If you're resisting something that's happening, that is aversion. If you're not knowing what's happening, that is delusion. So if any of these three are in play, then our mind is not quite in the optimal attitude for meditation.

It becomes very interesting to explore in an ongoing way these qualities of greed, aversion, and delusion. And again, I would just keep it really simple: Do I want something to happen? Am I resisting something? Am I not knowing what's happening?

Transition times in retreats are very interesting times to watch these formations. As you go into the dining room tonight, for those of you who've been continuing, were there any thoughts of, "Wow, it's really

getting crowded in here?" Were there any thoughts of, "Why are these new people so noisy?" Were there any thoughts of, "Why didn't they serve tonight what they served last night?" Were there any thoughts of, "Oh, the room's too hot or too cold?" These are subtle or not so subtle movements of liking and disliking. And in any moment we can wake up—our thoughts are telling us what's happening—we can wake up to the presence of these.

If you just came in from outside, also a lot of thoughts usually get activated coming into a new retreat situation. Where's my room? Is it in a quiet part of the building, or am I right next to the stairs or right next to the showers? Is there enough time after the work period for me to get in a shower before the first morning sitting? Is there anybody really cute on this retreat? I'll check it out as soon as I get in the hall. What's my yogi job? Do I like it? Do I not like it? All the questions are kind of around: this is a new place, is it going to be okay for me? Checking out whether I'm going to be safe here, whether I'm going to find my way. Plenty of opportunity for liking and disliking.

And then if we don't notice those movements of liking and disliking, then we're missing something. We're missing what's happening, and delusion is present. So if we're not knowing what's happening, we can come back into the present moment really quickly. Just notice something that's happening—it could be a breath, a sound, a sensation, an emotion, a thought, a visual sight. Just notice what's happening. Then you're in touch with the present moment.

If you notice that there's greed, then see if it can be released and move into acceptance. If you notice there's aversion, see if it can be released and move into acceptance. Sometimes it can and sometimes it can't. But be aware that if the mind is caught in one of these reactions, the meditation will not be as clear as it could be because the mind is clouded by that reactive formation.

For those of you who've been practicing for a while, of course the desires and aversions get more subtle. They start to relate more to the meditation itself. There's a longing for repeating a very still and present sitting. There's a yearning for states of concentration or the absence of thought. And you can feel this in your body at times. It feels like the body can't settle in a relaxed way to the present moment because there's a straining for something else. You may not even know what it is, but you can feel how the body is lifting up, moving towards something else. And often it's a memory of some beautiful meditation state—some peace, some love, some rapture that we want to have again.

So we tune into the movement of greed even as it relates to very refined states that we touch. And it's a good recollection that, as one teacher said, we're not practicing to try to stop thinking. First, because it's impossible.

We can't do it, so that will be frustrating. But we're practicing so that we know our thoughts when they're there. Oftentimes, part of the striving in meditation is we want to stop thoughts from coming because we love peace. But now we're clinging. We're attached. We're trying to recreate something. So we need to accept just the way things are. If thoughts are present, what are they? Observe the thoughts just as easily

as you would observe the breath.

But suppose I look and I'm not wanting something particular to happen. I'm not resisting what's happening, and I'm in touch with what's happening in the present moment. This is the expression of non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. This is the expression of a very wholesome state of mind, and it's from this wholesome, clear, unbiased view that we can best see things the way they are, the way things really happen in our experience.

One teacher described this kind of right attitude as an unentangled knowing. This is really what we're trying to set the conditions to unfold. And this is where the persistent looking at right attitude will lead you. As you examine the movements of wanting, of not wanting, of delusion, you'll find that they will be refined. They will diminish and sometimes fall away by that very examination.

So start to notice when you're in this place where the three are not present, and there truly is non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. This experience is a kind of balance, a kind of contentment, and a clarity—an unentangled knowing. And then this can become more the reference point that the mind will guide itself back to again and again, a very fertile ground for insight.

Sariputta, one of the Buddha's chief disciples, was once asked, "What is nibbana?" He answered that it is the destruction of greed, the destruction of hatred, and the destruction of delusion. This is called nibbana.

I hope you notice that this is very close to the description of right attitude. The absence of greed, although not yet completely destroyed, the absence of hatred, and the absence of delusion, even though they're temporary, comes very close to the description of nibbana. What this says to me is that this right attitude, as we start to find it in our meditation experience—and it's never so far away, never that remote—starts to resemble very closely the very goal of the path that we're walking.

We don't have to wait for a hundred thousand lifetimes down the road to get a sense of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. We can find it now in this quality of right attitude, and it gives us a little bit of a taste of the very end of the path. For me, this becomes a really inspiring way to look at practice because the path and the goal start to merge. What I am heading for is not so different than the way I'm walking. The goal comes closer, the path rises to meet it, and we can abide in this kind of contentment and fulfillment, at least temporarily.

This is really what I wanted to say this evening on the subject of right attitude. You'll hear us talk a lot more about it as we go through the retreat. For now, I would encourage you to take up this investigation as something you direct the mind to regularly. Look at the presence of greed, aversion, or delusion, or the presence of non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. And this will itself be the way to refine and develop the quality of right attitude.

Andrea will lead that sitting and the chanting of the sharing of blessings.

If you've just arrived and your body is tired, you have full permission to skip that sitting tonight. You can start tomorrow morning with the five o'clock wake-up and the five-thirty sit.

We look forward to seeing you at the first sitting after breakfast. Please rest well.

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