Acceptance

Melanie Waschke · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 55:09

After listening to Sky's dharma talk last night—I arrived a little late and sat around the corner to listen—I was very tempted when I walked by the hall and saw that beautiful orange flower in front of the statue to simply pick it up, hold it, and enjoy the silence with you. But Carol already told me two weeks ago that I cannot do that. I have to say something. So that's what I'm going to do.

I would like to start tonight's talk with a story I heard many years ago when I was also sitting a long retreat. I think it was told by Tara Brach at that time; she teaches in Washington DC. It's the story of a man called Jacob, and when I first heard it, it deeply touched my heart. It has stayed with me—it keeps coming up, especially in those times when I feel struggle or when I feel unsure why I'm doing all this practice, in those hard times. I wanted to offer this story to all of you. Perhaps some of you know it and will simply hear it again, and perhaps for some of you it's new.

Jacob is a clinical psychologist by profession. He has retired by now and has been meditating for over twenty years. Occasionally he would give dharma talks to small groups in his area, sharing the dharma with everyone around. Jacob was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. As the disease progressed, he experienced times in which his mind would go totally blank—he didn't know where he was, sometimes didn't even have access to words. He would become very disoriented.

One day, as he was scheduled to give a dharma talk, he was feeling fine going up there, feeling fine moving up the aisle to take his seat. But the moment he sat down, his mind went totally blank. He didn't know where he was. He didn't know who all the people were, why he was sitting there. He was just completely blank.

But since he had been practicing mindfulness for such a long time, what he did was pause. Then he slowly brought his palms together in front of his heart, did a bow, and began naming out loud what he was experiencing inside: "Afraid. Embarrassed. Confused. Feeling like I'm failing. Powerless. Shaking. Sense of dying. Sinking. Lost."

He continued for a couple of minutes until slowly his body started to relax and his mind grew calmer—which he also noted. Then slowly he regained a sense of where he was. He bowed to everyone, apologized, and looked around.

When I heard that story, it touched my heart so deeply, and I can still feel it when I tell it. It was just that sense of presence he delivered. One person in that group put it really well. He said, "No one has ever taught us like this. Your presence has been the deepest teaching." And that it has been for me.

What I would like to talk about tonight is acceptance. That quality is so deeply represented for me in this story and in the way Jacob dealt with such a difficult situation—not knowing where you are, not knowing what to do, feeling all those terrible feelings inside. The way he dealt with it, by just putting his hands together in front of his heart and bowing, is such a deep gesture of being present with respect and kindness and openness. At the same time, he had the courage to name out loud what was happening and share it with everyone. He showed all his vulnerability, truly being with what is there and allowing it to be just as it is.

That's one part of the story that has always touched me. The other part is that it has truly inspired me to practice. Because we don't know. We don't know how things will unfold—how much we will have a certain sense of control over our mind, what kind of stressful situations we might encounter. And what usually happens when we get into those situations is that our habits come up. Depending on what we have conditioned, that's what's going to arise.

For me, Jacob represents this deep longing inside, this deep aspiration to really practice in order to be prepared. The moment where this preparation will surely be needed is the moment of death. And I have this sense that as much as I can, I would like to be prepared—to have conditioned those wholesome qualities in this mind so they hopefully arise when appropriate.

That's why I want to explore acceptance, along with different related qualities, as the theme for tonight. I think it has been a big part of my own practice.

And it still is. It's not done.

As the Buddha says, what one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of the mind. For me, this resonates so deeply. What is frequently thought about and pondered upon—that is where the mind will incline. That is where it will go, especially in those moments of stress.

So I would like to start with just a few definitions of what acceptance is. The first thing we always do is look it up in the dictionary. I found two definitions. The first one was: acceptance means the act of taking or receiving something that is offered. Then I looked at another dictionary, and it stated the same beginning—the act of taking or receiving something offered—but then it added: with approbation, satisfaction, or acquiescence.

That was actually interesting to me because it showed there's a degree of acceptance. It's almost like acceptance can go on to deeper and deeper levels. I found it fascinating that even the dictionary made that kind of distinction. And the verb "accepting" was defined as willingly or readily receiving. That sounds pretty much like a lot of our instructions, right? Receiving what is. Being willing to be with what is.

A lot of what presence is for me has this underlying tone of acceptance—to really be willing to be there, to show up, to be open, to receive, to let in. Tara Brach, who wrote the book *Radical Acceptance*, defines it as recognizing the truth of this moment without resistance. She calls that immediate openness. It's really to

be there. Another way one could put it is: body and mind are not tensing against anything that is. There's no tensing—not in the body, not in the mind—just an openness to receive, to be with.

Guy actually told me when I mentioned a week or two ago that I was going to talk on acceptance, that one of his first talks was also an acceptance talk. He said that he had put forth at that time that radical acceptance is an approximate form of enlightenment in the here and now, in the present moment. There's no leaning towards anything and there's no pushing away anything or hiding away from anything. It's just being there. No movement towards or away from. Just being there.

So maybe we pause here for a moment and just sense what you're experiencing right now. You don't have to do anything special. Just be aware of what is present. Is it allowed to be there? Is it allowed to be just as it is? Or can you sense that there's a little resistance? Or maybe not little—maybe it's gross resistance. And if there is, is that resistance allowed to be there? Can you feel the resistance? How does it feel? How does resistance feel? Do you feel it in the body? Do you feel it in the mind? Just be aware. What's the attitude in the mind right now?

For me, in a way, accepting very often means just to broaden the space for what is. Just to let it get a little more spacious, a little more spacious each time, with a very soft tone in the mind. As Joseph has said in one of the interviews a week or two ago, if you're struggling, there's always something you're not accepting.

I have found that to be very true. In my own practice over the last few years, whenever I feel there's struggle or tension—I sometimes call it "knotting up"—I just drop in that question: So what is not being accepted right now? And I leave that space open to see what comes up. That sometimes helps to just broaden the space a little bit.

As you probably all have experienced, we all have those places inside we don't so easily accept or admit or be with. About a year ago, one of my colleagues at work gave me this cartoon. I tried to enlarge it so it's not the whole thing, but maybe you can see it at least a little. When she gave it to me, I right away found it very funny, which is unusual for me. I very often don't get cartoons.

Or it takes me a while, and then I'm like, "Yeah, it's kind of funny," but it doesn't really land for me. But somehow with this cartoon, I really liked it and found it genuinely funny.

So it shows—I don't know how well you can see this, but I'll explain it. It shows two bees in a beehive. And what you can see, you know, like a beehive has all those six-angled cells made of wax. These two bees are standing on that hive with all those hexagonal cells, and one of them is holding a map which also shows a beehive with all those six-angled cells. And he's studying it really hard. The caption reads, "Face it, Fred, you're lost."

I found it really funny. I'm glad you find it funny too, because when I showed it to my partner, it was very interesting—usually he's very good at cartoons, but he didn't get it. And I recollected that maybe this has

to do with certain situations we sometimes have when we go on vacation, where I feel like we're driving somewhere, and at some point I just sense that we don't really know where we're going anymore. We have the map, but it doesn't feel like we really know where we are. So I'll point out, "Well, maybe we should ask someone." Which usually means he will take the map and say, "No, no, we're almost there. It must be right around the corner."

Accepting being lost.

I must admit, in my own practice—it's been years ago now—but I think it was actually a talk Carol gave where she mentioned that she sometimes just notes "feeling lost." And it was such an aha moment for me. It was like, "Oh, yes, feeling lost. I can just be with feeling lost." How does feeling lost feel? How does vagueness feel? How does cloudiness feel? And just really be with that instead of trying to get it clear right away again—"What's going on?"—and just rest in not knowing.

For me, these are all little examples of how hard it is most of the time to really let it be as it is, to really feel it as it is right now, and not try to make it just a little bit better or just a little bit different. Or as Joseph has said many times, the tendency to think, "If I watch it enough, if I observe it enough, then it will change." But what if it's just like this? Can I feel that?

In Sharon Salzberg's book *A Heart as Wide as the World*, I found a story about the Dalai Lama. As we all know, the Dalai Lama is a very bright and wonderful being and so often serves as an example of doing things a little differently than we usually do. This is one of those stories where I really feel he demonstrates such a capacity to be with what is, with a certain lightness.

A few years ago in Tucson, Arizona, the Dalai Lama gave a week-long series of teachings on patience. Over 1,200 people attended the event. One of the nights, the Dalai Lama was explicating a chapter of Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, an eighth-century text covering the entire path to enlightenment. Moving line by line through the manuscript, the Dalai Lama presented his commentary in Tibetan. While it was being translated, he examined the upcoming lines he would speak on next.

The Dalai Lama's English is quite good, and at one point during the translation, he looked up from the manuscript and said to the translator, "You are mistaken. That's not what I said." The disagreement that followed was about a matter of syntax—whether Shantideva, in establishing a point about patience, had said "she said that to him" or "he said that to her."

The translator responded by saying, "No, Your Holiness, I did not make a mistake. In fact, the text says 'he said that to her.'" The Dalai Lama replied, "No, it says 'she said that to him.'" Quite a courageous translator, right? The translator again disagreed, and they discussed it back and forth for a while—"He said that to her," "No, she said that to him"—and so on.

The Dalai Lama then turned back the pages of the text until he got to the disputed section. He looked at it, then burst into loud laughter, saying mirthfully, "Ha ha ha! Oh, I made a mistake!"

There he was, having been caught in an error in front of 1,200 people, laughing uproariously about it. Can you imagine? I don't know if I, even with a small group like this, could be so light about making a mistake. "Oh, making a mistake—it's like this, feels like this."

This is a very different conditioning than we usually have.

Being on a long retreat like this, I really feel it's such a great opportunity to practice this allowing of what is. There's a fairly safe container here, as probably most of you feel. There's not much you have to do and take care of. There are not many outward actions you have to take in terms of relationship and responding to what people say or want from you. So it's quite an opportunity just to allow yourself to go inside and to be with those places that are so hard to open up to—the places we so easily either try to skip over, telling ourselves, "Oh, it's not like that, it's already better than that," or where we just don't get close to. Yes, it's kind of in the back there, but let's leave it there.

This kind of space I have found really allows me to be as honest as I can with what's actually present. Sometimes it's painful and sometimes it's joyful. Sometimes it's dull and sometimes it's actually very interesting. Sometimes there's wisdom coming up. Sometimes it's just papañca over and over and over again.

So even if it's papañca, I have more and more incorporated into my practice dropping in that question: What's the attitude right now? Oh, I don't want this. Ah, resisting. Can I be with that resistance? Stop thinking. Oh, judging. Is that judging allowed to be there? Just to really be as honest and open as I can with what's coming up.

One aspect of acceptance for me, which I have probably already pointed out, is this softness, this kindness—this mettā quality. Not in a huge way, just in a very soft kind of tone, a very loving kind of tone, to be with what is. And that can mean it doesn't have to be all open right away. It can mean just a tiny little bit further each time I touch it, or I sense it, or I feel it.

By surfing through the internet, I actually found another story which just kind of popped up. I wasn't really looking for it, but it has really touched me. It's called "A Story of True Love and Acceptance."

This is what true love is all about. It was a busy morning, approximately 8:30 a.m., when an elderly gentleman in his 80s arrived to have stitches removed from his thumb. He stated that he was in a hurry and had an appointment at 9 o'clock. I took his vital signs and had him take a seat, knowing it would be over an hour before someone would be able to see him. I saw him look at his watch and decided, since I was not busy with another patient, I would evaluate his wound. On exam, it was well-healed, so I talked to one of the doctors, got the needed supplies, and removed his stitches and redressed his wound.

While taking care of his wound, we began to engage in conversation. I asked him if he had another doctor's appointment this morning, as he was in such a hurry. The gentleman told me no, that he needed to go to the nursing home to eat breakfast with his wife. I then inquired as to her health. He told me that she had been

there for a while and that she was a victim of Alzheimer's disease.

As we talked, I asked if she would be upset if he was a little bit late. He replied that she no longer knew who he was, that she had not recognized him in five years now. I was surprised, and I asked him, "And you still go every morning, even though she doesn't know who you are?" He smiled as he patted my hand and said, "She doesn't know me, but I still know who she is."

I had to hold back tears as he left. I had goosebumps on my arm and thought, that is the kind of love I want in my life. True love is neither physical nor romantic. True love is an acceptance of all that is, has been, will be, and will not be.

So how can we work with acceptance? One thing I find really important to point out: acceptance is nothing we can get at will. It's nothing where we can say, "I want to be accepting right now." It doesn't work that way. It's a process of letting go, of opening up.

Tara Brach in her book has outlined three steps I have found really helpful. She says the first step is just having the intention to be open and accepting with what is present. So the first step we always take is just to incline our mind, to have that intention to be more and more accepting as we go along.

Then the second step is what I also pointed out: the softening of the mind around what is. Can the mind just soften and maybe touch the edges of what is so unpleasant, of what is so uncomfortable, of what is so fearful?

And just very softly, get in contact. Slowly, slowly, just touching it.

To help with that, I have found different ways to be helpful. Sometimes I have found it helpful just to pay attention to the space behind my eyes. Sometimes it's just been this tiny little bit of softening the space behind my eyes and just kind of letting it drop almost. That helps me to soften the mind and be accepting with what is.

Sometimes it has been helpful to just whisper this little phrase: "Okay, this too. Yes, this too. May this too be there. May I care for this too."

At other times, I have actually found that, as Jacob did with his outward bowing after I heard that story, I just kind of inwardly do this little bit of bowing to what the experience is right now. Just a tiny little softening and bowing and respecting of what is.

Sometimes, as I have said, I drop in the question—either "What is not accepted right now?" or "What's the attitude in the mind right now?" Just another way of allowing to be there what is there.

Another way I have found really helpful is often taught by Ajahn Sumedho, a monk in the Thai forest tradition. The phrase he often uses is, "Oh, it's like this." Oh, anger. Anger feels like this. In my experience, it has just helped at times to take away this "it's me being angry" to simply "oh, there is anger." How does

anger actually feel? Can I be interested? Can I be open to explore what anger is like, even though it's very unpleasant? How does it feel?

And one last possibility I have at times used is just having the sense of putting a tiny little smile. Not in a big way, or kind of smiling over something. It's more like just letting the sides of the lips move up a tiny little bit to say, "Okay, may this be here. May I open today."

And we actually know from modern scientific studies that smiling—the muscles that are involved in smiling—actually opens up a relaxation in our nervous system. I've read many studies showing that this usual fight, flight, freeze reaction we have is just kind of put aside a little bit, because usually we smile when there's friendliness, when there's openness, when we can relax with our surroundings. So it just kind of helps. And there also have been studies showing that perception changes a little bit in terms of being more open to what is and having more of a positive tone in the mind towards what is. And again, not as a way to kind of get around something or to get over it—just as a way to really open up to it as it is.

And then this third step Tara points out is the step of surrendering. And this surrendering can just go deeper and deeper and deeper. Just this really surrendering to life as it is, to life as it's unfolding in this very moment.

And to me, that has a very mysterious quality. It has this "don't know" quality. There is an unfolding and there is a process. And there's probably a lawfulness in this process which I don't always understand. But that's how life is unfolding right now. That's the Dharma. That's how it is.

Our conditioning is usually very different. We want to say how it is. We want to control how it is. We want to have it our way. It's a tiny shift, but it's a deep shift to this receiving mode: How is it?

What I find important to point out is that strengthening this quality of acceptance doesn't mean that we don't have boundaries. I find that very important. It doesn't mean that we just go over our needs or that we let others do whatever they want to do with us. To me, acceptance and wisdom—or wise discernment—really go together. But it needs a certain acceptance and allowance to really be with the situation as it is for wisdom to arise, and to really find what's the appropriate response.

I have always liked—I don't know which Zen master it is—but a Zen master's explanation or definition of enlightenment. He said, "Well, it's the appropriate response." So that means whatever comes up, can we be with it, open up to it, really feel it, and then see what comes up out of that? Not trying to figure it out, but just letting it evolve as it comes up, and then take whatever action it needs.

So acceptance doesn't mean that we don't take action. Actually, in my own experience, I have found the more I have been accepting with what is coming up, the stronger at times I can really make a statement if I find something inappropriate or if I find that someone has hurt me. The more I have really felt how the hurt has come about in me, the better I can actually say it out loud so that the other person might understand and actually feel the impact of what he or she has done.

The other aspect I find really important to point out—and perhaps this emphasis comes from my background as a psychologist—is that acceptance also requires skillful means at times, especially when it comes to traumatic experiences. When we have those kinds of experiences arising, we need a skillful way to actually be with them. There's no use in simply feeling overwhelmed over and over and over again. That just fries our nervous system.

As we teach very often, it can be skillful to be with something for just a tiny little moment, and then return to a place that's more neutral or even comforting. When the mind is more relaxed, open, and balanced again, perhaps we can touch that difficult experience once more—for as long as we're able. But when we feel increasing tightness or overwhelm arising, we can return to that place of refuge. It might be the breath, or the touching of our hands together, or feeling our feet touching the floor, or listening to sounds—whatever that is for you. The key is to be skillful in allowing the mind to stay balanced.

In my own experience, I have tried many times to just focus down on something, wanting to push through it. It's painful. It's the painful way. So we learn to be aware of that wanting, that striving, that pushing—and to include that too. Feel it. It's fine for that to be there, but we simply hold it in awareness.

This brings me to another aspect of acceptance I have found so valuable: the element of trust. To really accept and let be what is, it's actually like a little jump—at least in my experience. It's a little jump into the unknown. There is no knowing ahead of time how things will unfold if I completely let experience be as it is. Let it get as wide as it wants. Let it get as tiny as it wants. Let it get as strong as it wants. There is no knowing how it's going to unfold.

For me, it really takes that quality of trust to allow myself to drop fully into the experience, to feel it as it is.

Ajahn Chah, one of the great masters in the Thai forest tradition who has since passed away, put it beautifully: "When I had been practicing for only two or three years, I still could not trust myself. But after I had experienced much, I learned to trust my own heart. When you have this deep understanding, whatever occurs, you can let it occur, and all things will pass on and be quelled. You will reach a point where the heart tells itself what to do. It is constantly prodding, constantly mindful. Your only concern needs to be to continue contemplating."

Isn't that beautiful? Just trusting the heart, trusting the mind, trusting the Dharma, trusting how it will unfold. There's no "I" needed. It's going to unfold the way it unfolds.

Perhaps another way to approach this comes from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which has become quite popular, especially in working with chronic pain—the kind of work I do. Just a couple of weeks ago, I came across someone who has also been working for years and years with patients in chronic pain. What she says is that actually ninety percent of the pain is the holding of the pain. It's not the sensation of pain itself that's so painful; it's the holding, the trying to control, the attempting to manage it

without really allowing it to be there.

In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which is very much grounded in mindfulness and acceptance and commitment to one's own values, they use the image of quicksand as a metaphor. They say acceptance is pretty much the same as dealing with quicksand. Before preparing for this talk, I thought I'd look up what the actual instructions are for dealing with quicksand. It's fascinating—you could translate almost every step directly into meditation instruction.

The first step they give is: if possible, avoid quicksand. Translated for practice, perhaps: if possible, avoid struggle. But if for some reason you couldn't avoid it and you've found yourself in quicksand, the next step is to drop everything. They explain that your body is less dense than quicksand, so you can't fully sink unless you panic and struggle too much—which causes the sand to further liquefy—or unless you're weighed down by something heavy.

Sometimes we can let go of struggle. Sometimes it just needs this little recognition: "Oh, may I let that go? Oh, I've seen that story 1,575 times already."

May I let it go this time? Sometimes it works.

The next thing they say is: relax. Quicksand usually isn't more than a couple of feet deep. If you panic, you can sink further, but if you relax, your body's buoyancy will cause you to float.

Then they say: breathe deeply. Not only will deep breathing help you remain calm, it will also make you more buoyant. Keep as much air in your lungs as possible. It is impossible to go under if your lungs are full of air.

The next step is the one where it really involves trust: get on your back. Can you imagine? You're in quicksand and what you're supposed to do is completely get on your back. If you sink up to your hips or higher, bend backward. The more you spread out your weight, the harder it will be to sink. Float on your back while you slowly and carefully extricate your legs. Once your legs are free, you can inch yourself to safety by using your arms to slowly and smoothly propel yourself. If you are very near the edge of the quicksand, you can roll to hard ground.

This involves a tremendous amount of trust. And it totally goes against what we intuitively would do. It's just like practice—not doing so much.

The next step they say is: take your time. If you're stuck in quicksand, frantic movements will only hurt your cause. Whatever you do, do it slowly. Slow movements will prevent you from agitating the quicksand. The vibrations caused by rapid movements can turn otherwise relatively firm ground into more quicksand. More importantly, quicksand can react unpredictably to your movements. If you move slowly, you can more easily stop an adverse reaction and avoid getting yourself stuck deeper. You're going to need to be patient. Depending on how much quicksand is around you, it could take several minutes or

even hours to slowly, methodically get yourself out.

Does that sound true for your practice? It can take a very long time with certain habits, and it requires a lot of patience to just be with them over and over again.

Then the next instruction is: get plenty of rest. Other than panic, exhaustion is your worst enemy. This is the striving—the instruction is not to strive, to really relax. Since it can take a long time to get yourself out of quicksand, be sure to take breaks and just float on your back if you feel your muscles getting tired.

So if we're in struggle, sometimes we really need to place the attention somewhere else and be with something that's more neutral, or perhaps even pleasant, so the mind can become more balanced again.

I think this is a quite extraordinary example, especially for those situations of great stress. What it takes is to trust, to pause, to relax, to breathe, and then to very slowly see what kind of actions will serve.

In my own practice, I have so often thought, "Oh, this—but let's quickly get back to the breath. Let's fix this and then get back." But there's something important about just really being with what is, and at times simply exploring and testing what works. There's no right or wrong experience. I know we keep saying that, but it's the way we're relating to experience that's important.

I would like to finish tonight's talk with a poem that probably most of you know, but I still find it such a powerful reminder of what acceptance means. It's Rumi's poem, "The Guest House."

This being human is a guest house. Every morning, a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness—some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all, even if they're a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture. Still, treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice—meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

So perhaps we might simply sit together for a moment. And whatever is present right now, let it be there. Just as it is.

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