The Spiritual Compost

Winnie Nazarko · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 48:04

Good evening.

I was thinking in preparing for this talk about the different ideas we can get about what it means to have an open heart. A number of different images came up in my mind. I thought of stories of various saints that were taught to me or read to me when I was a child, growing up in the Christian tradition. Some of these people were very hard to believe, actually. Some of them seemed more normal, but some of them seemed really far-fetched. There were even people where you would question, why was this person picked to be seen as a saint? Perhaps it was political.

But this idea of there being an archetype of a being with an open heart—a saint or a sage or an enlightened one—runs through all spiritual traditions. There's some version of this. And when we consider the possibilities for ourselves, this might seem like something so completely far out there that it's ridiculous to even take seriously. Or we could think of it as something we do want to aspire to, but it comes with a particular understanding of what that would be like.

We might think that it would be like an idealized version of ourselves—us but without any of our bad habits or personal quirks. All the rough edges would be completely buffed off, and we would be well-adjusted. We would have no neuroses left. Everybody would love us. Our magnificence would shine forth and be acknowledged by the world. But we'd still be modest.

Or we might have some counter-conditioning around these spiritual models and think, "A saint or somebody who's holy sounds like somebody who has no boundaries. You could never really be who you are. You would never be able to say no to people." It seems too sugary, too saccharine, too unreal, too hard to believe, too impossible in all ways. Too pastel. Too sweet. Not going there, not going to try for that—a kind of aversion to any idea of high-level potential as part of the spiritual path, at least for you.

Or maybe when you think about what it would be like to have an open heart, it just doesn't seem like a very safe thing. There's so much pain and suffering in the world, pain and suffering in our own mind streams and in our lives, in our experience of others. Who is the philosopher that said, "Hell is other people"? And I'm sure with this individual, other people were saying, "Hell is this guy."

It can be very difficult to relate some of these models or aspirations to ourselves as we actually are as humans.

In thinking about where our own particular spiritual path goes using this Buddhist context, there are some parameters that can be somewhat confusing. It's talked about in terms of wise effort. Wise effort is

compared to unwise effort. This wise effort, which is part of the Eightfold Path, has four great efforts within it: the wise effort to prevent the arising of unskillful and unwholesome states and actions; the letting go of unskillful and unwholesome states and actions; and then the wise effort to summon and develop and extend the wholesome and skillful.

So it's clearly saying some things are not to be cultivated—they're to be let go of. Some things are to be cultivated—they're to be developed. It can sound very binary in a way, very dualistic.

The Dhammapada also talks in these terms in certain sections. For instance, it says: "Make an island for yourself. Get right to work. Become wise. When you are purged from impurity and free from mental taint, you will reach the noble state." That could make it sound like you're excising this stuff from your mind stream, taking a sharp implement and carving away large parts of what you actually do experience in the effort to become one of the noble ones.

These statements, if taken alone, don't seem to have much use for what's not skillful and what's unwholesome. And yet when we do meditation practice, of course, what we see is that the unskillful and unwholesome states are frequently present. Sometimes it can seem like that's the only thing happening, even for long periods of time—just one version or another of these things we're being told we shouldn't be cultivating.

So the question is, how do we deal with this material? Especially since it's very clear that some version or another of greed, hatred, and delusion—or all three—are going to be present in our mind stream all the way up to the point of complete awakening, which for most of us is probably quite a long ride.

How do we deal with the fact of the unwholesome and the unskillful? One way we may be inclined to go about this is through a kind of perfectionism. We've heard what it's supposed to be like—which is the first misunderstanding.

Because what's being said in the conversation around wise effort isn't what it should be like right now. It's a statement about where we are orienting, where we are journeying to. It's not saying it should be like this right now.

So being clear about what we're cultivating is skillful—it's wise view. But if we take a dualistic understanding of this, it can lead us into a kind of resistance to, and a non-acceptance of, what we are actually experiencing in the present. And that's a definition of suffering, right? There's reality, and then there's the position we're taking, which is different. Suffering. That's the definition of suffering.

So we can't get rid of this stuff by cutting it out, since it's actually there in the mindstream. And we can't really ignore it, because unseen, it trips us up—it operates anyway and is kind of running the show. So then the question is: is there some way in which this ignorance, this not knowing, this unawakened, unenlightened stuff that's so much a part of our mindstream, cannot be a complete impediment to practice, since it's there anyway? How do we practice with what isn't wholesome and what isn't skillful in

and of itself?

When we start to get a little more continuous with our practice and notice what is arising in the mind more continuously than we have previously, sometimes it can be a bit of a shock. As I was talking about in the last dharma talk I gave, there's a lot of really weird stuff in there. It can be kind of shocking. And the fact that it's shocking really points to the importance of having a wise attitude towards this—an attitude of mettā, an attitude of compassion in the mind for the reality of what is there, to not go to war against our direct experience.

It's very interesting when you look at the two practices of mettā and the practice of insight, vipassanā. The ultimate stage in the practice of mettā is a mind that has equal goodwill and loving friendliness towards all beings, regardless of whether they're pleasant or unpleasant, regardless of whether they're known or unknown—complete equality of kindness and care and love towards all without exception. That's the fully developed mind of mettā.

The fully developed late stage of insight practice, high equanimity, is a mind that can open to, can connect with all experience exactly as it is, without exception, with a friendly, open, interested awareness. And from that stability and openness and clear seeing—a non-distorted mind that's no longer reacting or moving with any experience—opening to the unconditioned can happen.

So you tell me: are those two different minds, or is that one?

This really points to the importance of mettā practice in general, and the attitude of mettā in insight practice, because we're not going to punish ourselves into awakening.

Another point is this: if we're very identified with what we're experiencing—meaning if there's a very strong self-sense present in the practice—it becomes very, very difficult, because there's always something going on related to what it means about us if we have a particular experience. If we have an experience of anger, if we have an experience of greed, if we feel aggressive, if there's a lot of sleepiness, if we feel a lot of resistance—any of these states come up and we turn them into evidence at the trial of our own worthiness. "Oh, good sitting today"—and the inflation comes along. "Oh, bad sitting"—bad meaning whatever is not the imagined preferred version—and then it all falls down. We feel bad about this self we've put in the middle of things, and the spiral into feeling hopeless and lacking confidence starts to really pick up momentum.

But here's another version of how we can think of this binary. What if we thought of this goodness that we're pursuing, this beauty that we seek to develop, this enlightenment that we desire—what if we thought of that not as something out there that we have to get? What if the door, the access point to this, is hinged so that it opens inwardly? The door opens inwardly; it's not hinged to open outwardly. If we're trying to get out to get it, it's not out there. It's in here. It's in here and it has everything to do with what you directly experience.

If we have an idealized version of what we should be experiencing, there are some dangers with that, besides the fact that it doesn't work. We might try to manufacture an ideal—you could call this "creating a state." We might try leapfrogging over what we directly experience, just skipping past it to look for something else. "Whoa, I don't want to go there," even though it's what's predominant in our lives. We can do something called the spiritual bypass, which is instead of dealing with things necessary for us to deal with in order to be a grounded human being in touch with the full reality of things, we just decide we're going to float off on a cloud of incense or something.

So if we have an imagined outcome or an ideal version of what should be occurring, there's a kind of craving going on there, and it doesn't even necessarily have to be conscious. Very often it's not conscious. It's just this feeling that it should be something different than what it is.

You might not be able to say exactly what it should be, but it should be different. Or perhaps you can be very specific about it: "I should be able to stay with the breath. I should be able to remain there the whole hour. There should only be a certain number of thoughts in this sitting. I shouldn't be feeling restlessness. I shouldn't be sleepy. I should be like this. I shouldn't be like that."

This is a kind of straining—straining to create a model of experience, then straining to bring it into being, straining to hold onto it, all while ignoring the crosscurrents that are actually present, the forces working against that attempt. The result is the actual creation of suffering, not the end of suffering. As I said last week, when the causes and conditions are present for a certain experience to arise, it's going to be present. Given the totality of factors that are there, this is the experience.

A wiser, much wiser way to think about practice is that instead of being the manufacturing of anything, it is the illumination both of what is skillful and of what is not skillful. Connection with both of these is the path to awakening. Equal connection to both of these is the path to awakening.

Again, this is not to say that we don't make discernments about the direction we're going. We still understand on a big-picture level that we're cultivating the skillful and letting go of the unskillful. We're relying on the liberating power of mindfulness, which has the capacity, when it connects with any object, to strengthen wholesome qualities in the mind stream and to weaken unwholesome ones. But for mindfulness to be present with both types of states, we have to be open in some way to experiencing the full range of what's present.

The challenge with this strategy is that, let's face it, we do have favorites. In the same way that with metta practice you start with yourself or someone who's easy to love, we have certain states that are easy to love—states of concentration, states of calm, states of mindfulness, states of clarity. These are good. These are genuinely good.

But just as with metta practice, the near enemy of metta is desire—a kind of craving that can get in there and glom onto experience, then start trying to manipulate it out of a greed in the mind to keep things from

changing or to make them be the way we want them to be.

Or, using again the metta analogy, states that we experience in insight practice can be a little more like neutral people—the ones you don't really see. It's not that you have anything against them, but they're not particularly interesting. They're not dramatic. They're just not seen, not really of interest. They're not compelling in the way things are that are really pleasant or really unpleasant. The neutral zone—just neutral. This is a very important field of practice, subtle sometimes.

And then, of course, we have states that are analogous to the difficult people, the enemy. The Buddhist personality types tell us something about this. We all have greed, hatred, and delusion in the mind stream—all three. But we tend to be specialists.

To briefly explain: if you're a specialist in craving, if that's your propensity when you fall out of balance, there's going to be a lot of attraction to what's pleasant, a lot of wanting, a lot of tendency to hold on, a lot of getting lost in what's pleasant when it's strong.

If you're a person who is primarily deluded, there's going to be confusion and difficulty about connecting with things in general, an uncertainty about what's really going on and what you should do next, a kind of doubt about everything sometimes.

If you're a person who is predominantly aversive, then you're going to know exactly what you don't want. There's going to be an effort in the mind to do something about what's unpleasant or unwanted, which can take the form of either fleeing from it or, if you're the more aggressive sort of aversive mind, a full frontal assault upon it in order to make it shape up.

These are the three tendencies, and we can see them in our minds when we have various types of experience. I'll come back to these three types later in the talk.

When these states arise and we have an agenda in regard to them other than simply acknowledging their presence and opening to them in a balanced way, the war is on. There are at least two different things going on in the practice: there's what's actually happening.

And then there's all the manipulation, tinkering, rejection, editing, striving, correcting on top of it. Big time split focus, usually with a big "me" in the middle of it—suffering, but expending a lot of effort.

So then the question is: Is there a way to actually use unskillful states in service of our liberation? Since they're there, right? And they're going to be there in some version or another.

When I was thinking about this today, I did a little research—a little dharma research. I found an article called "How to Compost Chicken Manure." It said one of the first principles was: never put uncomposted chicken manure in your garden. It will burn. But it was encouraging. It said chicken manure can be composted with other materials. Compost using chicken manure is able to hold exceptional amounts of water, which can help your gardens.

This spiritual practice, this spiritual process, is a transformational process that uses what you've got. Now, I'm not saying the mind stream is always like chicken manure, but you've got it. Use it.

Here's what they said to do. Number one: prepare a container. Here we are. We've got the container. We've got the form. We've got the teachings. We've got the environment. We have the teachers. You have what you need. You have a container.

So then here's the important part. To the chicken manure—or to these hindrances in the mind stream—we must add other materials. It says you need to add to the container various materials to help the manure decompose more quickly. Mindfulness. Mindfulness. This is the primary ingredient to pair with what's going on in the mind stream because it's the activator. It activates the whole process of turning this from suffering—unconscious or conscious suffering—into something that actually serves your awakening.

It says you should rotate the materials in the compost pile. So you turn it over. You turn it over. Investigation.

It says as part of the process that you should add more manure and more materials at least three times. I'd say no problem meeting the threshold.

And then it says: allow the compost bin to sit undisturbed for about two to six months. Afterwards, it will have a sweet, earthy scent. Now you can add it to your garden.

A little bit of fun with this, but it points to an important principle: the awakening comes through connection with this—the right kind of connection with this. It doesn't come through trying to push it away, trying to chop it away, trying to ignore it. This is the field of awakening—everything that you can experience within the body and the mind. It happens no place else.

So you could say the way out of suffering is a better relationship with our experience in the moment. Friendlier. More mettā-infused. More interested. More accepting. More allowing. More receptive. Less judgmental. Less self-bound. Closer. More mindful. More consistently connected. Non-identified. Without preference or bias for what that experience is.

You could say it's not about getting different experiences—it's more about getting into wiser relationship with what is there to be known. It's about the angle of entry into what's present.

So you can make skillful use of unskillful arisings—which is good, because there are so many of them. And this is really where you start to see the inherent creativity of this process of spiritual awakening. If the angle of entry into experience is skillful, is correct, things purify themselves. There doesn't need to be the self doing what it imagines is necessary to do.

When each experience is met with the same attitude of balanced and connected acceptance, then a virtuous spiral happens. Reactivity in the mind stream decreases. Clarity of mind increases. Mindfulness quickens and strengthens. Energy builds. Interest builds. Clinging lessens. Calm opens. Equanimity grows.

And this cycle goes on and on.

But the quicker you can get to being non-preferential about what it is you're experiencing, the stronger support you can give to this cycle strengthening.

Because remember, as I said before, mindfulness is the universal remedy. It strengthens what's wholesome. It decreases what's unwholesome.

I was walking the other day in an area where there are many rocks by the side of the road, as there are around here. On top of one rather large rock was a pine tree, perhaps two to three years old. What really drew my eye to it was this: looking at this tree on the rock, there was hardly any soil there. It was just very thin. And I thought, "How did that ever get going there? How did that manage to grab hold with so little to nurture it at the beginning of its life?"

As I looked a little further, I saw how it started. The rock's surface created a little pocket, and then some leaves and other things collected there, and they decomposed and made a little bit of soil, and then the roots started growing. One of the roots somehow found a crack into the rock—or maybe the root actually made the crack into the rock—and it followed that tap root, pulling water from someplace down there, perhaps connecting to some soil below.

For some reason, this image really struck me because it seemed to suggest that we can start without feeling there's a lot to work with. We can start with just a little—a little bit of something where we can grab hold and connect and open and allow and receive. We don't have to imagine that we need to leapfrog over the whole process, going straight to no defilements, no kilesas. Can we work in trust with what's there? A small pine creating its own ecology that would support its own growth. That's what you're doing. You're creating your own ecology of mind by how you're relating to what you experience.

This theme about finding a way in difficulty, finding a creative use for difficulty, trusting the fruitful darkness—this is part of every spiritual path. It's not a light-only journey. How could it be, given the full range of what we experience as human beings? This is all about bringing light forward where there has been none, bringing the skillful to the unskillful. Making the mindstream conscious with the right context and the right angle of entry purifies itself. No "just experiences," no ownership towards them. Just experience. But complete responsibility to practice wise husbandry towards all conditions which arise. Taking responsibility for the composting.

I said I would return to the three major types, and I'll do that now.

The path for someone who is primarily a greed or craving type moves along in a way where the mind starts to notice the tendency to look for what's pleasant and to grab it and hold it, to try to keep it. There's a kind of thirsting restlessness, a looking for something, a wanting something—maybe not even knowing what is wanted, but a wanting. When this kind of mind learns to allow for what's pleasant, to see the craving, to see the attachment, to allow pleasant experience to go away just like all experiences must, to

notice when there's resistance to letting pleasant go, to see the suffering in that, to begin to be willing to notice what is other than pleasant—when this mind develops in this way and all experience becomes equally acceptable and interesting, this mind resolves towards a mind of mettā because it sees beauty. This becomes a mind of mettā.

When the mind that's deluded, that has difficulty connecting to the mindstream, that has uncertainty and questions, that has difficulty landing anywhere—when this mind starts to settle, starts to trust the capacity to directly know and moves out of the thinking mind, the speculating mind, the doubting mind, the circular questioning mind of doubt—this mind moves in the direction of being able to trust its own direct knowing, to open and know directly what is there to be known. It learns to rest in its own understanding in faith and becomes a mind infused with equanimity.

When a mind of aversion learns to see that there is suffering in resisting what is present, when it comes to understand that it does not need to do anything with what is unpleasant or difficult, that it goes away on its own, that it is not threatening, that it does not destroy a self, that it is not about a self—this mind learns to accept with patience what is true in its experience, learns to open and notice what is pleasant, what is easeful, allows that into the mindstream. This mind, when it resolves itself, moves to wisdom.

All these transformations take place through this process of learning to open to, see, allow—and the mind will teach you itself.

I'll close now by saying that I wish your deepest aspirations will be completely fulfilled, and that you will learn to know and trust the good heart which is your true nature, and allow that to transform your understanding of the conscious mind.

Let's sit for a moment.

May the merit of the practice we've done be for the liberation of all beings without exception.

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