The Meditator as Revolutionary

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:09:53

I'd like to talk about something tonight that usually, if I talked about it at all on a group retreat, I would probably choose to do at the end—perhaps as the last evening's talk as you're moving back into the world, the other world. But for different reasons, we've decided to do it now, and some of the themes I'll pick up later on.

I'm going to start with a question for you: Where do you think all this is leading? Where do you think it's going? What's your sense of that? What's your fantasy of that? And fantasy is a good word here—it's not a bad word. We need fantasy; we need a fantasy of practice. It's very important. What's your fantasy? What's your sense? Where is it going?

Some people will be familiar, from hearing or reading, with the idea of awakening or liberation. Some may not have heard those terms before, or may have heard them but don't really relate to them. So whether I do relate to that kind of idea—awakening, liberation, something like that—or whether I don't, whether I'm a practitioner of many years or someone very new to practice, what's the sense of where this is leading? Am I aware of my fantasy of where practice is headed?

We usually don't think this way consciously, but to me it's very important to be conscious. What's going on there? Not because it's a bad thing and I shouldn't have one—I should have one. I need to have one; otherwise I can't motivate myself. But I need to be aware of it.

So do I, for instance, somehow dimly or more consciously imagine that when I'm awakened, or more awakened, or further down the line, everything will be easier? I'll be much calmer? Everything will be simpler? The world and its complications will be simpler to my eyes? Do I expect that? Do I want that?

Consider the Buddha statue—the Buddha Rupa. You can get them at garden centers nowadays. What does it say to you? It's a really powerful image, an archetype already. Not quite as prevalent in our culture as the crucifixion, but it's there in our culture by virtue of the fact that you can get it in a garden store. People know what that is. What's it saying? What does it say? What's he communicating? What's that archetype communicating? What's he doing? What does it show him doing?

He's sitting there, very serene, very still, very undisturbed, oftentimes with his eyes closed in meditation. That's a powerful archetypal image being communicated there. And through the image, much else gets communicated. He is the archetype, or an archetype, of the equanimous sage—the sage, the wise one. Equanimous through his sagacity, through his wisdom.

But there is a kind of aloofness in it. If you read the ancient texts, there is an aloofness, a transcendence of

the world that's very much there in the original texts. We don't like that so much nowadays, so we kind of paper it over to fit more of our contemporary view. But it's still communicating something about an equanimity that comes out of a certain kind of wisdom that has a kind of aloofness in it—separation, distance. Not good, not bad, but it has an effect.

Compare this to the story of Jesus overturning the tables of the moneylenders—this hot-headed young man in the temple. It's a different archetype being communicated.

Not good, not bad, just different and has different effects. I don't even consciously think about these archetypes, but they permeate our culture and our meditation culture and spiritual culture. They most certainly have their effect, even for people who are new to practice and don't think about concepts like liberation.

Why is this important? Because the fantasy I have in relationship to practice will determine what my practice becomes. It determines the direction of my practice—it cannot help but have an effect there. It might also be that I choose the fantasies and archetypes I relate to depending on what I want. Perhaps I want less bother, less impingement, less hassle, less disturbance, less agitation. So I zero in on the spiritual archetypes that seem to communicate that possibility.

A little while ago I was talking to a good friend. She was telling me that when she was growing up, as a child and into her adolescence, she felt visceral pain looking around her at the world—the pollution one can be aware of, the plastic in the oceans and environment, all kinds of things. She actually felt real pain with that. As she got older and encountered the possibility of learning meditation and Buddhism, her thought was: "If I practice, maybe that pain will die down. Maybe I'll have some freedom from that pain."

But that's not what happened. Actually, there was an increase in sensitivity. An increase in sensitivity with deepening practice as the heart opens—this comes with that price. Alongside a kind of equanimity, yes, but the sensitivity is growing.

In the Buddha's time, 2500 years ago, the whole fabric of society and culture was different. They couldn't have conceived that human population would grow so exponentially, or the rapidity of technological innovation and industrialization. They couldn't have conceived that humanity would be able to have such a devastating effect on the climate—it just didn't enter the picture. Couldn't have conceived of the kind of juggernaut of globalization that is now full steam ahead. It was a very small society: me and the acts I do and their immediate consequences.

When you have globalization, it's a much more complex picture. Where did this shirt come from? What effect does it have on someone in Bangladesh? So what does all that mean? It's a very different situation we're dealing with now.

What do I imagine as I move towards awakening—if I think in those terms at all? That everything will become easier, feel easier, appear simpler, more calm? That everything calms down? Some things,

yes—and I can only share from where I am and my own experience—some things, most definitely: much more calm, much more ease, much more simplicity. Some dukkha, some areas of suffering, just gone. Cut off at the root, in Buddhist terms—they can't come up again. Absolutely.

But given all that complexity, some situations and some sufferings that we are in the midst of in our life, in our culture and society and global society nowadays—the answers are not so easy. The whole situation is not so easy at all.

The question is: Am I willing to be uncomfortable? How willing am I to open to that discomfort? This being, this heart and mind—am I willing to actually bear all that and have that kind of vulnerability?

What do I want? Is it my own private nirvana? If you think in nirvanic terms—which many people don't. Or maybe I don't think in terms of nirvana; I just have an image. As I grow in practice and hopefully develop, maybe I have this distant image: Someday, maybe my heart will be touched by this stuff, but not really disturbed. I'll have a kind of soft, open heart, which is nice—it's nice to have that—but there's not a sense of deep disturbing.

Some of you probably know the novel *Franny and Zooey* by J.D. Salinger. Do you know this?

It's a really fabulous, wonderful novel. They're sister and brother—Franny's the sister and Zooey's the brother. And they're talking. Zooey is in his thirties, I think, and he has an ulcer. So Franny's asking him about his ulcer. When his sister asks him about it, he says, "Yes, I have an ulcer for Christ's sake. This is Kali Yuga, buddy, the Iron Age. Anybody over sixteen without an ulcer is a goddamn spy." Typical J.D. Salinger language, but you get the point.

I was at a party two weeks ago or something, and I was talking with a friend of a friend. She made a very insightful comment. She's not a dharma practitioner, but just to preface it a little bit: Buddhism, the dharma, talks about suffering and the end of suffering. That's the thread through all dharma teachings and everything—suffering and the end of suffering. It's a very famous comment of the Buddha: "I teach suffering and the end of suffering."

But what does that mean, suffering? What does suffering mean? Nowadays it has a ton of different interpretations. What did the Buddha mean when he said suffering? What do I mean when I say suffering? What do you mean when you say suffering? And what do you mean when you say the end of suffering?

So this woman at the party was really insightful. She said, "Well, historically in the West, if you go back to Freud and this idea that we need to open the awareness to the depths of the psyche, to intra-psychic suffering that can come from that—understand that and relate to that. And a little time goes by, and psychoanalysts and psychologists understand that actually the family influence is really important."

So for Freud, it was all here—one was projecting onto the family, but the problem was really here. A few

decades go by, and now there's a bigger understanding: the problem comes from the family, from stuff that happened in childhood. Nowadays, it's almost unheard of—you don't meet anyone who doesn't acknowledge that there's some suffering that comes from that. We all think, "Oh, my childhood and my parents were like this and this and this." And it's understood: I need to work with that, I need to explore that, I need to heal that.

So there's been this growth of understanding which you never encounter in the Buddha's teachings. He never talks about someone having a painful childhood or their parents being difficult. It just wasn't there in the understanding. But nowadays we wouldn't think twice about it. Maybe some people are now beginning to consider the influence slightly wider—of gender and race, maybe a little bit. But what about one step further: the society and the environment and the suffering that comes to me from that? You understand? The whole picture is getting bigger and bigger, and there's a growth in understanding here.

So Freud talked about the repressed—what am I repressing that can come up and cause me pain? But it's a hundred and something years later now. We all know about this childhood pain; it's very important. But is that really where the repressed is these days?

Looking at the cultural landscape today, I find myself wondering: is childhood pain truly what we're repressing in our current era? Or has the source of our repression shifted to entirely different territories? This remains an open question for me.

What feels clear is that the social and environmental situation affects us deeply, just as we affect it in return. Just as we've learned the value of exploring and healing family wounds and childhood trauma, so too must we attend to social and environmental pain.

With all this awareness, I notice something paradoxical about practice. Some agitation naturally lessens as we develop our meditation, yet I feel certain forms of agitation can actually intensify—and perhaps they should.

The same friend I mentioned shared stories of her many retreats in Bodh Gaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, at a monastery in Bihar, which is among the poorest states in India. There, suffering confronts you directly—children begging, incredible poverty, poor hygiene, malnutrition, disease. This reality permeates your meditation practice in ways utterly different from our protected environment here.

For her, this proved profoundly helpful, offering genuine perspective on her own pain and suffering. Not dismissing personal pain—never that—but contextualizing it meaningfully. Looking back, she observed how some retreatants found the conditions too overwhelming. They kept the suffering at arm's length, attempting to create a protective cocoon. But she witnessed the consequences of such cocooning over the years, seeing how it carries its own significant costs.

This presents a fascinating paradox. Dharma practice is often described as revolutionary—and indeed it

is. The revolution lies in learning to turn inward rather than constantly chasing external experiences, in staying present with our difficulties and emotions instead of running away. This turning inward remains absolutely essential.

Yet here we encounter one of life's many double-edged swords. Dharma practice itself can sometimes become insular, even self-obsessed. We might develop compassion for others, but only for certain kinds of pain—those we can readily relate to or understand. I'm not saying this inevitably happens, but it represents a potential shadow we must guard against.

Consider relationships—whether friendship, family, romantic partnership, or marriage. When difficulty and pain arise, the solution isn't always to let go internally, to look inside and work solely with our emotions as we're practicing here. Sometimes we need to communicate directly. Sometimes we need to take action.

The same principle applies to social and environmental difficulties that impact us. The work isn't only internal. Sometimes I need to speak out. Sometimes I need to act. Revolution requires both turning inward and turning outward.

This brings me back to the question I posed earlier: What do we want from working with emotions? What are we truly seeking? I suggested we compile a list throughout this retreat, adding insights as they arise. We've already identified several important elements.

For me, one goal feels particularly crucial: developing both the courage and capacity to feel the pain of our times. When I teach—when I focus on helping people meet their individual suffering through metta practice and other techniques—I always carry another intention in the background. Beyond individual healing, I'm interested in something more expansive: growing your heart's capacity and developing the courage to feel.

Can we cultivate this capacity to feel the pain of our era without denial? Can we develop this sensitivity with less numbness, less apathy, less overwhelm, less ill will? None of this comes easily—I truly don't believe it's simple at all.

About a month ago, I encountered a news story online that some of you may have seen as well.

It was there for a day or two, then it disappeared. Marine scientists are almost certain now that they haven't considered the combination of three factors: climate change, global warming with ocean warming, ocean acidification, and I think the third one was pollution. They hadn't considered how those three act together. And they concluded from very recent research that there's almost certainty that we are on the brink, in the next decades, of the largest marine species extinction—not in the history of humanity but in the geological history of the earth.

So that appeared for a day or two on the internet and then disappeared again. I don't know—I mean, that

really affects me. I don't know where it lands with you. I find such grief when I open to that.

Or what's going on in Somalia and the Horn of Africa right now? And again, it appears a little bit and then it seems to disappear. So the famine and the drought there—perhaps you heard this too—in that area of the world, of course sub-Saharan Africa, the rains used to fail every ten to twelve years. That was kind of typical, and there would be drought and famine and massive crisis as there is now. And now more recently they're failing every other year, every two years. Why? I didn't read the next part of the sentence. I would guess from climate change.

And similarly, on the same theme, climate scientists and environmentalists are pretty sure that the chances to limit global warming to two degrees Celsius are pretty much gone. We can pretty much say goodbye to that. And we're looking at the moment at more like 3.5 degrees or something, which is actually a massive difference because it's above the limit that causes runaway climate change. We can actually predict what happens there.

So how does it feel? How is that? These are our times. This is what we're living in.

Now I know, and I know for a fact—and it's really important not to judge here, it's really important not to judge—sometimes a person cannot find any care in relationship to all that. It seems abstract. It seems like it doesn't involve me. I'm preoccupied with other stuff. Or for other reasons, there's no care. Could be all kinds of reasons.

But if that's the case, and that's really okay—so it's really important not to judge here—okay, to gently inquire: Well, what's behind that lack of care? What's supporting that lack of care? Why is it that there's this lack of care? It could be all different reasons. So where does that lack of care come from? That lack of connection, that lack of relationship with not just the earth and the biosphere, but also people elsewhere, humans?

Someone pointed out—George Marshall pointed out—climate change is principally a human rights issue. Forget about the environment; the earth's going to be fine. It's principally a human rights issue, which is a whole other way of looking at it.

So very easily it could be that the lack of care, in some cases, is from overwhelm or from a sense of powerlessness. Because what am I going to do? There are already seven billion people. It's already all out of control. And that's just too painful. Or it could be for many reasons.

It's really important that the inner critic, which Chris spoke about, doesn't come into these kinds of inquiries. But that there can be a gentle questioning there, a loving questioning.

There is, I think, what practice can offer—this capacity and courage to develop the capacity and courage to hold and respond to the world's pain.

Sometimes what we want is—because the situation now is so complex and the intricacy on the economic,

political, sociological, biospherical, technological levels, all this comes together. It's so complex, and we want simplicity. I want things to be simple.

And that's interesting because part of this is asking: What does it mean to be an ethical human being these days? So the Buddha had a list of five things which Andy told you about—five precepts on the opening evening. You know, try not to do this and this and this and this and this. And one of my teachers said, "That's great. It's like you just do that, you take care of it, and then forget about it and don't wrap yourself up in complexity and guilt." Really wise.

But I don't know how well that fits anymore.

Sometimes we might want, or a part of us might want, to open the textbook, read the list of rules and tick them off. And it's all very simple, though it can be helpful. Chris will talk about the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths, but I wonder if they need expanding nowadays. I don't know. I think so. I feel that practice and the path and our whole notion of what we're doing needs to address our relationship with the world's difficulties. To me that seems important.

I know some people don't feel it's relevant at all and would even find it weird that I would be giving this talk. You might find it weird that I'm giving this talk right now. And you might feel this is a very strange talk to be giving on the second night of a retreat, when people generally have bodies that are aching, minds that are aching, when they're a bit fed up, they're wondering if it was really a good idea to come, they're tired. I know all that.

But that was part of the reason for giving it tonight. As I say, I usually give it on this night, because if I think this talk doesn't fit here, maybe it's not the talk that needs to move and shift. Maybe it's my view of what meditation and what practice is that needs to shift. If I feel that addressing these issues doesn't belong here on the second night, on a night of difficulty.

So the world and its events and the world and its suffering and the ideas in the world and the values in the world and the assumptions in the world—they do affect me. They affect us enormously and insidiously. And I can't turn a blind eye to all that. Yukio Mishima, in a book called *Spring Snow*, said, "To live in the midst of an era is to be oblivious to its style." There's a lot in the air, in more ways than one, that we're oblivious of. We just absorb it. We just drink it in and it becomes how we see.

So what is this situation? We have touched on it already, but this is from Lieutenant General Dallaire. He was the general in charge of the UN peacekeeping mission in Rwanda when there was the genocide there. And he said, "At the Canadian Forces Peace Support Training Center, teachers use a slide to explain to Canadian soldiers the nature of our world. If the entire population of the planet is represented by 100 people"—this is from 2006, I think, so it's out of date—"57 live in Asia, 21 in Europe, 14 in North and South America, and 8 in Africa. The numbers of Asians and Africans are increasing every year, while the number of Europeans and North Americans is decreasing. 50% of the wealth is in the hands of six people,

all of whom are Americans. 70 people are unable to read or write. 50 suffer from malnutrition due to insufficient nutrition. 35 do not have access to safe drinking water. 80 live in substandard housing. Only one has a university or college education. Only one."

Most of the population of the globe live in substantially different circumstances than those we in the first world take for granted.

Here's another thing I came across in a fantastic book called *Requiem for a Species* by Clive Hamilton. It's about climate change. He said, "In 2007, the International Panel for Climate Change updated its assessment of the economic costs of emission abatement by bringing together and assessing the results of a wide range of economic models. What did it show? To be fair, let's consider the worst case for the economy—in other words, the most expensive it could be, which is usually the best case for the climate. So doing the utmost you can for the climate at the most cost to the economy.

"The most stringent target assessed involved cutting emissions to ensure that greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are stabilized at 450 parts per million of CO2 equivalent in 2050. The economic model showing the highest cost of reaching this target estimates that pursuing it would cause a reduction of global GDP of 5.5% in 2050." Okay, all very abstract. Most models show lower costs. "Bearing in mind that world income will be very unevenly distributed, what would that mean to the typical individual? Global population, according to the UN average estimate, is expected to increase from 6.7 billion in 2007 to 9.2 billion in 2050. If incomes grow at the anticipated 1.75% each year, average incomes will double by 2047. If we took stringent measures to restrict greenhouse gas emissions so that they stabilize at 450 parts per million, then, according to the models that show the greatest economic damage, at most the effect on the world economy would be such that the doubling of average incomes would be held back until 2050—a delay of three years.

"I have selected the most pessimistic numbers. A more typical estimate of the cost to GDP is 2%, which would mean the loss of only one year's income growth between now and 2050." So he concludes, "A one-year delay in the doubling of average incomes is the basis for the belief that pursuing a safe level of climate protection would be too expensive."

So you read something like that, you hear something like that and you think, what is going on with us as a species?

What's going on? Something is happening, and I think it's really complex. I don't even pretend to understand it fully. Something is going on. I certainly don't want to dismiss modern culture, which gives us so many gifts. But some of the values and ideas that underpin modern society and culture basically increase suffering for ourselves and for others. And this is where the Dharma comes in.

So let's examine some of these underlying assumptions. Back in the 17th century there was the Enlightenment with Descartes and Newton and others. The idea emerged that we could know an objective

reality from a distance—the universe does its thing separate from us and we can objectively know that. There arose at that time, and it persists until today, this myth of detached knowledge, of objective knowledge.

Julie Nelson, who is an economist, calls this objectivism. She describes it as "a romantic belief in the possibility of connection-free knowledge from an outside-of-nature, perspective-free viewpoint." This worldview praises emotional distance, autonomy, rationality, disinterestedness, and "hard" knowledge—all of which amounts to a deluded self-conception. This perspective persists in our view of nature, but also in our understanding of economics and politics. And this will come up in another talk—the whole idea of objectively knowing and experiencing meditation is also a myth, but we'll return to that.

Connected to this is another prevalent idea: that people are fundamentally rational beings. Really, when you give them the facts and lay out the information in front of them—whether about climate change or anything else—they'll see the pros and cons and dangers and choose the rational thing to do. This was assumed for hundreds of years to be how human beings operate.

But a host of recent psychological studies has shown that this is almost never what human beings actually do. Quite the opposite. In fact, sense of identity and sense of values almost always determines what information we accept. We accept only information that confirms our identity and values. We shape our thinking around protecting our social identity. When you present someone with inconvenient facts—like something about climate change and culture—that tends to actually harden their resistance and close them down even more. It's fascinating.

Researchers have furthered this work by distinguishing between what they call extrinsic values and intrinsic values. Extrinsic values include things like caring what other people think about me, financial success, status. Intrinsic values encompass caring about relationships, community, self-acceptance—values that transcend self-interest. People score differently on these value measurements. We're all mixed; there's a mixture there.

But this was a remarkably good predictor. Where someone fell in terms of their constellation of values was almost 100% predictive across numerous studies of how they would feel about the environment, human rights, their comfort with manipulation, and their relationship to prejudice.

What does this have to do with the Dharma? All of this relates directly to Dharma and Dharma practice, so please keep that in mind.

Another sociological survey recently tracking values and attitudes clearly showed that culture, society, and the messages within culture severely shape the values that people hold. In other words, whether we tend toward extrinsic or intrinsic values is shaped by the messages we receive from society—advertising and media in particular, but also political messages.

Advertising and media deliberately generate feelings of inadequacy. "I'm not good enough. I need to buy this. I need to change that and get this." They deliberately cultivate feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. Intrinsic feelings are dampened, squashed, while extrinsic feelings rise.

Do I think I'm immune to this because I'm a meditator? Maybe I've been meditating for decades and think this doesn't affect me? Here's something from Tom Crompton, who works for the World Wildlife Fund as a researcher: Advertisers employ huge numbers of psychologists. I don't know if you knew that—they employ vast numbers of psychologists.

Guy Murphy, who is Global Planning Director for the marketing company JWT, puts it in his own words—this is a marketing director speaking: "Marketers should see themselves as trying to manipulate culture, being social engineers, not brand managers, manipulating cultural forces, not brand impressions."

The more they foster these extrinsic values, Tom Crompton observes, the easier it becomes to sell their products. So we have this massive inundation of marketing and messages deliberately engineered to tinker with our values and change our value system. All of this feeds consumerism, feeds the whole mindset of consumerism and individualism. Out of that emerge new values, and the whole thing cycles upon itself.

This is again from Clive Hamilton. In all of this, it makes certain types of thinking and conclusions feel completely unavoidable—obvious. Something like how we think about economic growth, for instance, and the whole notion of the growth machine.

"The growth machine, which we thought we had built to enhance our own ends, has taken on a life of its own and resists fiercely the slow awakening to its perils of the humans it is supposed to serve." Strong language. "The closer some get to the levers of the machine, the more they must be committed to its goals. It is hard to imagine that anyone who believes that economic growth is part of the problem would ever be allowed near those levers. More likely they would be ridiculed in the newspapers and denounced in the parliaments. Ordinary people may at times question the wisdom of relentless growth and conclude that it cannot go on forever, yet they are soon bounced out of their subversive reverie by the inducements to go shopping. The system has created the type of people who are perfectly suited to what it needs: unending expansion. In this way the growth system governs itself. We think we have power, but the growth system awards power only to those who will advance its objective. We internalize the discourse so that we begin to articulate the interests of the system and govern ourselves according to its rules."

So the whole thing starts feeding on itself. We're in the middle of that, and Dharma practice is in the middle of that. Consumerism and economic thinking and values play into each other, and a snowball effect happens. Relevant to the practices we're doing: the emotions I feel—how much of them come from the ideas and values that I have? Ideas and values really give rise to emotions.

As a meditator, because a practitioner is interested in delusion, and here is a gross delusion, to me that makes it part of the remit of a meditator—because it's delusion.

With all of this comes a kind of falling, a fragmentation of the social fabric. Everyone's individually pursuing their ends. We've lost this sense of common endeavor, of being in it together, supporting each other in society.

Václav Havel also comments on the current zeitgeist: "We are living in the first truly global civilization. This means that whatever comes into existence can very quickly span the whole world." We've already said that. He continues, "We are also living in the first atheistic civilization—in other words, a civilization that has lost its connection with the infinite and eternity. For that reason, it prefers short-term profit to long-term gain."

I find this very interesting. I want to return later in the retreat to this whole idea of the infinite and eternity and nihilism, because I don't think it's wrong to be nihilistic necessarily—but what does it lead to? If I'm going to be nihilistic, can I be fully one hundred percent nihilistic and really go into it and explore that? Because that would be different. But I'll come back to that.

So what are our reactions to all this? To me it's so complex—this whole situation—and equally complex are the reactions we have. We have to look at ourselves with compassion and have a compassionate view of ourselves. Are my reactions helpful or not? This is always the question in the Dharma: My responses—are they helpful or not?

One can hear all this—about which cities in the world on coastlines will be underwater in so many years' time—and the mind may start going, "Well, the house on the hill is starting to look pretty good. Maybe I can get somewhere that's a little high up where the waters don't reach." But it's also a metaphor, because maybe I won't be able to afford a house on a hill. It's a metaphor for taking care of me and mine.

But that very self-preservation thinking is part of the problem. It's part of this—it feeds a kind of disconnection, and in doing that it feeds suffering. I feel the only way we're going to relate to this well is if there's a real sense that we are in it together. When the waters rise, they rise everywhere for everyone together. I'm not going to run up that hill and shut my doors and bolt my doors and stand at the window with a shotgun, or have my wealth preserve a place for me and preserve my security.

I'm running out of time, but it's very interesting—in some research I've been reading about the psychology of what happens in relationship to the threat of climate change, which isn't an immediate danger. That's partly why it's so difficult; I don't feel immediate danger with it. But basically there are all kinds of what are called maladaptive strategies we can have in response to the threat: denial, distraction, minimizing the threat, distancing it—"It's just somewhere in the future."

A researcher called Anthony Leiserowitz was asked in 2006 to write a report for the US government, and he concluded regarding the attitudes of the US population: "As a whole, the US public is currently in what

he called a wishful thinking stage of opinion formation, in which they hope the problem can be solved by someone else without changes in their own priorities, decision-making, or behavior." So it's kind of just mañana, mañana.

The pleasure-seeking is another maladaptive strategy, as is blame-shifting—it's easy to blame China now because of all their coal-powered plants they're building. There's also apathy, and what Clive Hamilton calls a "false optimism." He says about that: "Scientific observations of climate change have taken such an alarming turn in the last few years and global action remains so inadequate that pretending to oneself that it'll work out is a dangerous disconnection from reality."

It's actually a kind of disconnection from the reality of things. So it might not feel painful. Sometimes people don't feel any pain in relation to this. But I wonder about an analogy with that. You know, you can have cancer and be in a life-threatening situation or HIV, and there's no pain up to a certain point.

Or maybe a more accurate analogy—I worked for a very short time in a leprosy community in India, and I didn't know this until I got there. But the problem with leprosy, why they lose their fingers and things, is because what they actually lose with the disease is the nerve functioning in the extremities first. So they put their hand in a fire or something and they don't actually realize that it's hot because they don't feel it. And then fingers get burned and infected and they lose them.

Can I learn to tolerate these feelings? Really tolerate this—what I said earlier, this capacity. And I said in the opening, the range of the human heart and the capacity of the human heart is extraordinary. Can I learn to tolerate the feelings? Say with climate change—I'm using climate change just because it's in a way the most pressing issue of our times and certainly the most comprehensive.

Tolerate the feelings of, say, realizing that a major disruption above those two degrees which would trigger runaway climate change—can I tolerate those feelings that a major disruption in the climate is probably no longer avoidable? And what does that do? Can I tolerate those feelings? And can I practice so that I can tolerate those feelings?

So all kinds of unhelpful relationships and reactions we can have to all that. But also helpful, also helpful. And I don't have any easy answers at all, and I don't actually think anyone does.

So turning out, I call this talk "The Meditator as Revolutionary." So turn in and turn out. Revolution means to turn around, to turn out. But in a way, when I turn out the attention in terms of suffering, it's also relieving.

I feel this pain in life, and as I said earlier, maybe my pain in my life is not my fault. Maybe it's not my fault. Why can't I get it together? Maybe it's not my fault. Maybe it's the fault of the fabric of the society that we live in.

This is from James Hillman, a psychoanalytic thinker: "It's only depressing if you're in the posture of the

child and feeling powerless, and then there's still another big thing out there to blame and you can't do anything about it. But for me it doesn't feel depressing. It feels relieving, immensely relieving to know that it's not me that's at fault and I don't have to own and be the cause of all my misery. There's something fundamentally wrong in society and this relieves me of the blame, first of all. And second of all, it relieves me of the guilt. And third, it excites me, draws my attention outside to more than myself. That's not depressing."

So he's a psychotherapist and he thinks a lot about therapy. Therapy could be causing depression as much as curing it. So everything he says about therapy we can say about the Dharma and practice. Therapy could be causing depression as much as curing it, because the classic symptoms of depression are remorse, a concentration on oneself and repetition. "What's wrong with me? How did it get this way? I shouldn't have done that." Feeling poor and broke and without energy. In other words, a withdrawal of libido from the world. The moment you're focusing back on the world as dysfunctional, you're drawing attention to the world and that's not depressing.

He also, in conversation with a guy called James Ventura—fascinating conversation to read—they're talking about different kinds of therapy situations. It's not just your parents, your childhood, or your relationship with your marriage. There is a dysfunction in the society that is affecting us.

And the second step is, I cannot repair it in myself, in my own relationships alone, because my problem is social dysfunction. So how is settling things with my wife going to repair the dysfunction of the general situation? That's a romantic delusion—that if we could just get our sex right, our conversations right, if I could just find the right relationship, if my little home could be perfect, could be safe, if I could find balance in my home, I'd be happy.

Talk to my kid, talk to my wife, quit drinking, get laid decently a couple of times a week, get on a decent diet, get exercise, make a little more money—then I would really be okay. Except you won't, because you still live in this crazy world of dysfunction that impinges on you and influences you and yours twenty-four hours a day. Where the school isn't right for my kids, where the food I eat is not right, where the air I breathe is not right, where the architecture in which I spend my time assaults me. The lighting and the chairs and the smells and the plastic are not right, where the words that I hear on TV and are printed in the newspaper are lies, where the people who are in charge of things are not right because they are hypocritical and hiding what they are really doing. So how can I ever get it right within my home and within my marriage?

One of the things we are saying is, you can't make a separate peace. You can't sign a peace treaty with the society through therapy, and I would add, or meditation, or dharma practice.

One of the things they talk about, say for example, working with an eating disorder—people go to a group and discuss and support each other with an eating disorder. But actually you have to include in that conversation, in my group from now on, we must talk about agribusiness, fertilizers, pesticides,

packaging, advertising, school lunches, fast foods, diets. We have to talk about the entire thing because that's the situation, that's what's impinging.

So, meditator is revolutionary. Turning in, turning out.

Caroline Lucas, MP, said—I heard her speak and she was calling for national acts of civil disobedience from an MP. Cool. I don't know. You decide what it means. Meditator is revolutionary. You decide what that means for you. I need to look at my stuff. Definitely I need to look at my stuff. That's what we're doing. We're really looking at my pain and my stuff.

One of the words that dharma means, the original word dharma, also one of its meanings is duty. It's interesting. One of its meanings is duty. So we think, what is my duty in life? What is my duty to my family? My parents as they grow old, my children, my spouse, my partner, whatever it is. What's my duty? Duty can be a heavy word for us though. But what is my larger duty or my larger love and the movement of my larger love?

So all this to me very much affects dharma practice and how I feel I need to think about and relate to dharma teaching. This is James Hillman again. If you've never heard of him, he was head of the Jung Institute in Zurich. So he was at the head of Jungian psychotherapy world for ten years or something. He was head of their education department. And he's totally embedded in the psychotherapeutic culture for decades. He's probably in his late eighties now. And he comments a lot on that culture, but from within. So it's not an outsider.

And he says, suppose that we entertain the idea—he's a very radical thinker—suppose we entertain the idea that psychotherapy makes people mediocre. And suppose we entertain the idea that the world is in extremis, suffering an acute, perhaps fatal disorder at the edge of extinction. Then I would claim that what the world needs most is radical and original extremes of feeling and thinking in order for its crisis to be met with equal intensity. The supportive and tolerant understanding of psychotherapy is hardly up to the task. It produces counterphobic attitudes to chaos, marginality and extremes.

Strong words now. Therapy as sedation, benumbing, anesthesia so that we calm down, relieve stress, relax, find acceptance, balance, support, empathy, the middle ground, mediocrity. Strong words.

But everything that's said there, I have to ask myself as a dharma teacher, am I supporting that? Is that what I'm in the business of doing? I have to be careful what I say. I feel I really need to be asking myself these questions. What am I modeling as a dharma teacher? Am I modeling a kind of nice security of fitting nicely in as a well-respected citizen?

Am I modeling that? Well-adapted, well-trained, well-tamed.

So again, I might imagine as a meditator—I've been meditating, I'm conscious because that's what meditators do, we're into consciousness—I imagine then that I'm immune to the effects of all this insidious

value manipulation. Do I imagine that, and what am I going to do about it?

This reflection comes from Bhikkhu Bodhi, a monk and translator of the original Buddhist texts: "The special challenge facing Buddhism in our age is to stand up as an advocate of justice in the world, a voice of conscience for those victims of social, economic and political injustice who cannot stand up for themselves. This is a deeply ethical challenge marking a watershed in the modern expression of Buddhism."

The Buddha said the gift of the Dharma is the highest gift you can give someone. But what is the Dharma? What is it?

To me the Dharma is about values. So when I'm teaching the Dharma, I'm also teaching about values—values that matter, values that go deep. What that means is if you, if I, want to give the gift of the Dharma, it means speaking up about values. It means engaging this debate, starting a debate in the culture about values, a deep revolution in the discourse about values in our culture.

But this is hard. I don't have any simple answers at all. I'm fascinated and flabbergasted at the complexity of it all and the difficulty of it all. Sometimes it seems like we need a long view somehow. And also our time is running out, and we need a long view.

James Ventura relates a lovely passage from a conversation. He says just around when his kid was turning thirteen, "My kid came home one night after dark, sat on the couch"—and think of a thirteen-year-old boy where the sensibility is still there, the tenderness is still there, and the eyes are opening at that age and the adventuring is happening. This tenderness and openness of sensibility is going out to the world and exploring the world.

"He came home one night after dark, sat on the couch and in a kind of fury suddenly burst out with, 'It's fucked. It's so fucked, man. The whole thing is fucking fucked. What do you do in this world, man?' What could I say to him? That things are going to be alright when they're not? That it'll be okay when he grows up and gets a job when it won't?"

"I got a little crazy and impassioned and I said something like this: That we are living in a dark age, and we are not going to see the end of it. Nor are our children, nor probably our children's children. And our job, every single one of us, is to cherish whatever in the human heritage we love, and to feed it and keep it going and pass it on. Because this dark age isn't going to go on forever. And when it stops, those people are going to need the pieces that we pass on. They are not going to be able to build a new world without us passing on whatever we can—ideas, art, knowledge, skills, or just plain old fragile love. How we treat people, how we help people, that's something to be passed on."

Maybe you know the story: Once upon a time, two masons worked on a building site. A passing pilgrim asked the first what he was doing. "I'm just chipping away at another block of rock until payday on Friday," the man replied. The pilgrim turned to the second who said, "I'm building a great cathedral that

will not be finished until long after I'm gone."

We need that long view.

And what's the difference? It's so easy for fear to come up in relationship to all this. I've heard fellow Dharma practitioners, seasoned Dharma practitioners say, "I don't get involved in all that because it's just going down the road of fear."

But what's the difference between fear and concern? What's the difference between being afraid and being concerned? There's a big difference. To me, concern has stability, rootedness, strength and balance in it, which fear does not.

And the same person also said, "I don't go there because it just seems like a lot of anger, getting angry."

But again I ask, what's the difference between anger and ill will?

Ill will is when I want to hurt someone, when I want to put someone down and make them suffer. We could say anger is energized responsiveness at something that's not right—when I don't want to hurt anyone. Out of all that can come a fearlessness.

That's possible for us, that there can be a fearlessness in relationship to all this, just as much as in relationship to our emotions, also in relationship to the world situation.

There was a practitioner called Jesse Maceo, and there was an interview with him ages ago. He's interesting because he takes quite strong stands. He refused to pay taxes in the US because of military funding through taxes. When asked to explain himself, he basically said, "The deeper I go into my practice, the less I'm willing to behave in ways that diminish my sense of purpose on this earth."

He takes a really strong stand. So I don't know what that means for you. I know that part of practice is taking risks—that's for sure. To deepen in practice involves taking risks. And taking risks and insight feed each other. The more insight I have, the more risks I can take. The more risks I take, the more insight I get. They're mutually supportive.

I don't know what that looks like for you. Perhaps you feel a lot about this stuff I'm talking about, or perhaps you feel a little bit. But you might also notice that in certain groups or situations or with friends there can be a fear or hesitancy or reluctance to speak up—that it becomes uncomfortable in the room or that they might think you're such and such or whatever. Fear of speaking out. Is that something that I need to be constrained by? Or can I be radical? Can I let my voice sing out? My concerns sing out?

Hannah Arendt, writing after the Holocaust, was a commentator on the Holocaust and other things. She wrote: "There was once a wicked time when intellectuals grew feeble-minded and declared life to be the highest good. But death begins his reign of terror precisely when life becomes the highest good." She goes on to say, "If you are no longer willing to die for anything, you will die for having done nothing."

She's talking about the Holocaust, but why I bring that up is—what's going to give me a freeing perspective on this, a powerful perspective and relationship with all this?

Psychological studies also recently show that if you think about death a little bit, just a little bit, you tend to get more selfish and more self-interested. Being reminded of death tends to stimulate self-interest and selfishness and self-protection. But thinking about death a lot, about your mortality, has the opposite effect. It releases us—we let go of self-interest and self-imprisonment.

So the contemplation of our mortality actually is quite central here. It relativizes the whole relationship with self and other and existence. That's a factor—less self-focused values. Obviously the practices that we're doing and developing this capacity to hold what's moving through. So I can hold my own individual pain. Eventually maybe I can hold this bigger pain too. It's possible. It doesn't mean it's not going to feel like a lot, but it's possible. Absolutely possible.

And we haven't talked about this yet on the retreat—there are these very deep teachings of emptiness in the tradition. A whole re-understanding of the nature of existence and reality. And that brings with it equanimity, deep equanimity, deep spaciousness, deep strength and deep courage in relationship to all this.

So I want to finish just with some words from Martin Luther King. I was in London some months ago, and I met an artist who was also a bit of a journalist working in environmental areas. She had been to some conference with lots of dignitaries—kings and queens and world leaders—and they were discussing nuclear disarmament. But every time they talked about nuclear issues, they kept prefacing it with "It's the second most urgent problem of humanity," the first one being climate change.

So when Martin Luther King said this, I think he was talking obviously about civil rights but also about the threat of nuclear catastrophe in the 60s. But to me it applies as strongly today.

"This hour in history needs a dedicated circle of transformed non-conformists. The saving of our world from pending doom will come not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a non-conforming minority. Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted."

These words feel so relevant to our present moment. Whether we're facing the existential threat of climate change or the ongoing challenges of social justice and human dignity, the call remains the same: we need those who are willing to step outside conventional ways of seeing and being.

The dharma path itself is a form of creative maladjustment—a willingness to question the assumptions that most people take for granted about happiness, security, and what makes life meaningful. When we cultivate mindfulness, when we develop loving-kindness for all beings, when we see through the illusion of separation, we become beautifully maladjusted to a world that operates primarily from greed, hatred, and delusion.

This is not about being different for the sake of being different, but about being transformed by wisdom and compassion in ways that allow us to respond rather than react, to love rather than fear, to serve the wellbeing of all life rather than just our narrow self-interest.

The dedicated circle of transformed non-conformists that our world needs are those who have done the inner work—who have faced their own suffering with courage, who have cultivated genuine equanimity, and who can therefore offer something genuinely healing to our troubled world.

Shall we have some silent time together?

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