400 and Rising

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 42:31

It's very lovely to see everyone here. There's a few new faces also, and it seems like a lot's been going on. There's been a lot going on for us over the last while.

We had a trip up to the Pacific Northwest. We drove up with Dennis and Claire and stopped off at Davis on our way, where we met Amanda and got a feel for the town of Davis, which is a lovely place. Then we drove up to Shasta Abbey, which sits just at the foot of Mount Shasta, where there's a very mature Buddhist Zen community of Western monks. They're women and men, and they're all known as monks there.

They've been going for quite some time. Some of them have been in the robes since 1971, I think, for the most senior. But most of them have been thirty or forty years in the robes. They have a real—it's very inspiring and beautiful to be in their presence. Very humble, warm-hearted, kind, dedicated people and celibate monastics living in a relatively remote monastery up in Mount Shasta.

When I was with them, I had a sense that they're like river rocks, you know—all the hard edges have been worn away where you can see all the colors and the grain of the character, but without all of the sharp edges that most of us still have. I can see that living in community for a long time, you have to work through a lot of the difficulties and opinions and views that we all have. You have to keep letting go and letting go and letting go until you soften, but it's softening in a strong way, not in a kind of flabby way. So it was very inspiring to go there and meet those who had been there before, just to spend a bit of time with that community and be very warmly received.

Then we went on to White Salmon, which is in Washington, just across the border into Washington State, and spent a few days near the Pacific Hermitage there. This is three monks living in a very beautiful little hermitage with five acres of land, and they're very well supported by the local community. They didn't know when they moved there that there would be many Buddhist practitioners, but once they arrived and started to teach, they discovered that there were many people in the town who meditated and who knew each other but didn't know that each other meditated. So then they brought everybody together, and they have quite a nice community that supports them. They go on alms run every day and have very good support there in the community.

We met them, and then we went down to Portland and met with the board who supported them to become established. We learned a few useful shortcuts from the board about how to not get into too much conflict, because they pointed out that there are visionaries and nuts-and-bolts people. The nuts-and-bolts people get really annoyed—this is like in life, you know. The nuts-and-bolts people, the people who just

want to get on with things and do things step by step, get very frustrated with the visionaries because the visionaries may have a vision that's bigger than the nuts-and-bolts people can actually meet or feel would be possible. Then the visionaries get really frustrated with the nuts-and-bolts people because they feel like, "Come on, you know, there's so much potential, there's so much that can be done. If we just stay looking at every little nut and bolt, we're never going to get there."

At first they had quite a bit of conflict, and then they realized that what they needed to do was step in the shoes of the other. So the nuts-and-bolts people would look from the eyes of the visionaries and learn a little bit from them. And then the visionaries would step over into the shoes of the nuts-and-bolts people and learn a bit from them. In that way they were able to work together and support each other, and they've done an amazing job, I have to say. It's very inspiring.

Also while we were up there, we got in a few fun things. We went kayaking and saw a heron with two huge great chicks in her nest—enormous, great big things, big massive nest. Then we kayaked a little bit further and saw a bald eagle in her nest up on a tree. Then there were quite a number of what we didn't know were young—they were juvenile eagles. We thought they were female eagles actually, but they were juvenile, kind of brown and tawny with a little bit of white on the head but not much.

So we were watching these vast, huge, magnificent birds flying, and one came quite nearby. We could go in a little bit further in our boats and get close to the logs where it was standing and just watch this great, beautiful bird. It's the first time I've seen bald eagles. They're huge, magnificent birds, beautiful.

One of the attributes of an eagle is that it has the ability to see from a vast—it can fly very high. Some of them go very, very high. So it can see a big area from a large distance, so it can have the grand vision. And it can also focus down on the prey, so it can have detailed vision. So it has both of those qualities.

As we were kayaking, we were all there in our—I guess they're fiberglass maybe—kayaks and plastic paddles, and we had our little life vests on and everything. So it was like modern kayaking. But as we were going along, it gave me this sense of timelessness. I realized people have been traveling in this way along rivers and so on for thousands of years. Quietly. Being part of nature in that way. And seeing creatures in the way that we were seeing them. This was a normal thing at one time and probably still is in some places. And it was such a peace and a joy actually to be in that...

position where one is more quietly simply part of nature.

In the city, it's very mind-oriented and people-oriented. It's very different when a few people move out into the large space of nature, and you see your place in it all. As humans we're very vulnerable. We've lost a lot of the natural skills that we might have had at one time, and we need a lot of support in order to get even just to go out there for a while. So you get a feel for how vulnerable we are and how vast nature is.

For me in some ways it's reassuring to get that perspective again, because I think as human beings we've

lost the plot a little bit. We've gotten into this grandiosity, and we've believed it quite deeply—that we are not part of nature, which is a misunderstanding, and that everything is here for us, and that we can control it.

We have learned to control nature to some degree: genetically modified food, the way animals are farmed now as a commodity rather than as living beings, and medicine, surgery, all kinds of things that we've learned to do that give us the illusion of being in control. We've been running on this one for quite a long time now, this perception of being superior in some way and in control.

Part of what has been very prominent in my heart over the last few weeks is some of the results of this misunderstanding that we've been operating from.

Emily and I went to a rally outside the city hall shortly after she arrived. It was very poorly attended—there were about forty people there. It was very small. It was to encourage the divestment of government money from fossil fuels, started by a student, with very inspiring young people there.

Bill McKibben, who some of you might have heard of and who established 350.org about five years ago, came and spoke. He's been going around the country to encourage and rally people to really wake up to the situation that we are in—not just to sit back and say, "Oh yes, it is difficult, what a shame, the poor polar bears," but to actually take it in and make a stand and try to start to change the course of events that we've been actively encouraging at one time and, for many people, maybe more passively allowing more recently.

At one time people didn't really understand the results of, for example, burning fossil fuels. It wasn't seen within the bigger context because we didn't have the bigger context. But certainly in my lifetime, the trip to the moon where people first saw the planet earth as a whole—we have a picture of it by our shrine—people started to see for the first time: "Oh, it's a whole planet. It's not just about us and them and this border and that border and that continent. It is one planet." This was 1969, quite a long time ago.

Somehow we're very slow in really getting to grips with the fact that it is one planet—a unique and beautiful planet. Meanwhile we're still in this illusion of separation, and it's very difficult to wake up out of. But if we don't, well, we'll see, but it will have very serious consequences.

Bill McKibben established this organization called 350.org. The number 350 is what is considered a safe level of carbon dioxide in the environment—350 parts per million is considered safe. When he started the organization, there were 390 parts per million, so the intention was to try to get it down to 350. About a week ago, it was announced that that number has just reached 400, and there's no obvious indication that it's going to go down. If anything, it's going to go up.

This is part of the context within which we are living, and we are all part of it in our different ways. None of us are free from contributing to this, and I think for most people we prefer not to look at it because we don't know what to do. Maybe we don't really want to change our lifestyle, and there are things that we

know are not that great but we're going to do anyway because of this reason and that reason. I have those reasons myself. My family lives in the UK and I hope I will see them again, and that will mean flying, which adds quite largely to the carbon in the atmosphere. So there's this dilemma of being part of this destruction of the planet as we know it and yet not really knowing how to meet that.

While we were in Portland, we went to a teaching of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He was teaching at an environmental summit over a number of days, and we attended just one afternoon talk. He was full of joy—playful, light, a beautiful spirit—and he was also addressing quite serious issues. He particularly spoke about the importance of the feminine qualities. This isn't about women and men, but about the qualities of compassion, of nurturing, of listening, of dialogue, and how these need to be used at this time. We need to develop those at this time, and education—the importance of education.

For me, one of the most powerful things that happened on that day was on the way back. We were getting a ride with a Buddhist family who went to the Pacific heritage center that we'd visited—a couple with their eleven-year-old daughter and her eleven-year-old friend.

As we walked along, I was talking with them and asking how it was for them going to hear the Dalai Lama speaking about these things. They said, "Oh, he's really great, he's awesome. Dalai Lama, he's so cool." They were being a little bit polite with me because I'm a nun.

When I asked what they thought about what he was talking about, I said something along the lines of, "It's such a big thing, we don't really know how to meet it. We have to be able to feel the sense of fear and grief that arises when we look at the situation that we're all in together."

This one girl turned to me and said, "And anger."

And I was very touched by that response. I thought, here is this eleven-year-old girl, and her inheritance is that she's been born into this world at this time, which is looking really serious. At one point her father said, "It's so good that the girls are interested to come to something like this because they are the future, they are the change." As he said it, I thought, surely shouldn't we be the change? Shouldn't we be doing something about it now rather than waiting for them to grow up when it's already maybe too late?

These girls were very conscious of the situation they were living in, very consciously growing up in this reality of inheriting quite a big mess and not knowing—just as we don't know—what to do with it. My feeling is that for many people of our generation, we know about it, but we can forget about it. We can look the other way for long periods of time. But for somebody that age, they can't forget about it. It's very present. And that's really a good thing. It's something we can learn from because it is present. This is the context we're living in.

As we were sitting in meditation, this was quite strong in my heart. I did feel quite emotional about it. It's a very big thing. I was just sitting there thinking, well, what to do? How does the Buddha's teaching come into this? Because there are practical things one can do—there are certainly many petitions to be signed,

which I've signed plenty of—but somehow we need to allow it into consciousness enough that it will move us to do something. I know there can be a fear of that or resistance to that, knowing that it's uncomfortable and we don't really want to have to go there.

This is a bit like not acknowledging the fact that we will one day—that this particular body we have now will one day fall apart. That's just a fact. So not acknowledging the bigger picture is like not acknowledging the truth of the way things are. And it is a relative truth. The world and us as sentient beings and separate beings is a relative truth—sensitive and vulnerable as having been born into this world.

The Buddha is pointing to the truth of impermanence, change or flux, and the truth of no-self. So that is ultimately true. There is no self. There is this process that we're all in, or are not in, if you really want to look at it. That is truth. And there is also the truth of these sentient beings who feel and influence each other and affect each other.

As a Buddhist, for quite a number of years before I was a nun, I was very much in that relative truth and very conscious of the effects that human beings are having on the planet. I often used to think that this planet Earth would be a much better place if we didn't have human beings on it. But over time I've come to really appreciate the human race, fortunately. Because we are a marvelous manifestation. We have great potential, incredible potential. There is a lot of good and beauty that I see again and again—in people here who come here, and also when we go out on the street. It's surprising how many acts of kindness and consideration and respect I see, not just towards me as a nun, but toward each other. Many. And it's very beautiful.

It's part of our purpose here, as human beings on the planet, to manifest those qualities. We also have the ability to reflect deeply. So that's also part of our purpose—to understand, to look deeply and understand the truth of the way things are. The human race is not a blight. It doesn't have to be a blight on this planet Earth. We have greater potential than that.

But it is very difficult to know what to do, how to meet it. People can feel a sense of overwhelm or anxiety or maybe self-blame when we start to really open to the situation that we are all in together, and the fact that our actions have influenced that and continue to.

As I was sitting in the meditation, I don't have an answer. Don't look at me waiting for an answer because I haven't got one. I wish I had—it would be wonderful—but I don't. But as I was sitting there in the meditation, what I could see was that a support to opening to this truth is to really bring to mind and use the four brahmavihāras.

So I was sitting there and my heart was feeling quite a lot of turbulence, a lot of sadness. I thought, oh, I'm going to need the tissues next to me when I give the talk because I feel a lot of sorrow at what we've got ourselves into and what we're passing on to future generations.

And then I remembered the quality of loving-kindness. Just bring that quality to this troubled heart at this

moment. And as I bring that—I have to do it again now because it's feeling a little turbulent again—but as I bring that, it's not like sugarcoating. That's not what metta does, but it's an acceptance and an easing and a kindness with things as they are.

So as I bring that quality to my troubled heart, then I feel like it starts to calm down, starts to be soothed, and with soothing there's more clarity. So it's not soothing everything away—there, there, it's all right, everything's fine, don't need to worry about it, don't think about it. It's not like that. But it's about letting the heart settle enough that there can be more ease and clarity.

And then bringing in the quality of compassion. And compassion is about feeling with. It's about taking in the suffering of another and feeling with that suffering. So, you know, once you start opening to this big picture, it's pretty vast. And we can—you know, our hearts can break—so be careful not to overdo it. But to just take in part of the picture and really feel with it and allow yourself to feel the suffering, the trembling. It's actually okay to let your heart break. It can be a good thing. But don't let your mind break. Don't go crazy over it.

So really, with the support of the metta, then there's the possibility for the compassion to arise. It's not anger. It's not "it shouldn't be that way." But it's like, it shouldn't be that way and it is that way. So it's like a sense of acceptance—not acceptance in a passive way, but accepting this is the way things are.

And then, I didn't really get to mudita actually in my meditation. I kind of jumped over mudita. Mudita is like having a sense of appreciative joy or altruistic joy, joy for others' well-being. But I think if I were to go there, then I would feel the joy of that river that we kayaked down and the joy of the heron with her two huge chicks and the joy of the eagles as they soared in the sky. And the joy of those eleven-year-old girls who, in the times when they're not angry about the situation they're in, have a life and interest and aspirations.

And connecting with those qualities gives me a sense of—you know, I don't just want to give up. I don't want to say, oh, it's all hopeless. I want to see how can I make—what can I offer? What can I do or offer or renounce perhaps that can give joy to others, give safety to others, give a sense of well-being to others. So I think it's very, very important to connect with that mudita, actually, even though I didn't in the meditation.

And the mudita, for me, like the mudita of a forest, of an old forest which has been allowed to grow in its natural way. Not a sustainable forest for making printer paper, which is a different thing altogether, because there isn't really the time for a whole ecology to evolve in a forest like that. It's a monoculture. The mudita of an old forest that's been allowed to grow and develop in its own way, that has probably billions of different life forms that are part of it.

And also quite a number of our supporters recently have had babies. And it's kind of a mixed bag, isn't it? Because you're bringing children into the world at this time. And what are you bringing them into? But at

the same time, I'm seeing really, really good people who have good ethics and will know how to bring their children up well bringing children to the world. And then there's a real sense of mudita also—these kids are getting a really good start, the best as you can get really, at this time. So I feel like to bring those things to mind are really important because that gives a sense of purpose and uplift and generosity and love.

And this helps to keep the heart open and buoyant and keep a sense of purpose and meaning. So it's very important.

And then the fourth of the Brahma Viharas is equanimity. So one might think that equanimity is like a sense of indifference and not really caring or noticing or being attentive to. But equanimity is also one of the enlightenment factors. So indifference is definitely not a factor of enlightenment. So if you're thinking equanimity means it doesn't really matter, then you know you haven't quite got it tuned in right.

But equanimity is partly like having the broad view, seeing like the eagle when it's soaring really high. This is the nature of equanimity—seeing the broad view, seeing the whole picture.

The reflection that the Buddha gives us on equanimity is the reflection on karma. He says, "I am the owner of my karma, heir to my karma. I inherit my karma. I am related to my karma"—or as I discovered when looking up the Pali recently, it also means "bound to" or "attached to my karma." I dwell within my karma; I abide in my karma. The results of what I do will be my home.

Karma literally means action. In Buddhist terms, it means action with intention. It doesn't refer so much to what we receive as to what we do and the intention behind what we do. All action with intention, whether skillful or harmful—of that we will be the heir.

This is a powerful reflection, and this is what the Buddha gives as a reflection on upekkha, equanimity. It's recognizing that when we feel "it shouldn't be this way" or "it's wrong"—well, it's like this. Everything we're experiencing in this moment is the result—maybe not everything, but much is—the coming together of past karma. This is what we call vipaka karma, the result of past karma.

If we're caught in the way of thinking of being separate, solid people, then it can feel a little bit stuck: "I'm just stuck with this karma because it's what I've done in the past." But the beauty of the teaching on karma is that it's a constant process. Whatever we meet at this moment, whatever situation we're in at this moment, how we meet it will determine how it evolves.

We don't really know whether there's time to change the course of events that we've set rolling in terms of the warming of the planet and the increase of carbon and the kind of runaway greed that is motivating all of that. We don't know whether we can change that or not yet. And we don't know that even if we did manage to change it now, whether it would be enough. We don't know.

But we can at least open our minds to it—to the situation that we're in, open our minds to our part in it,

what we're doing, and what we can do to change that. The reflection on karma is like accepting, understanding, knowing things are this way. I'm inheriting this because of my personal karma and the collective karma of the human race. It's both. We're not just separate individuals. My intention, my speech and my action influence how things will evolve in the future.

This isn't saying that there's any guaranteed outcome—there never has been for anybody. But it means we have a choice in how we meet the world. First of all, we need to become conscious. We need to allow this into consciousness. Then we need to really bring in the qualities that will support opening to this vulnerable situation we find ourselves in as human beings. And then look at how we can best meet this.

I mentioned earlier that before I was a nun, when I was quite engaged and sensitive to the environmental situation, then as a nun I pretty much put it all on the shelf for many years—for about twenty years almost. I held a much bigger picture in my mind, which is also true. If you read the suttas, the Buddha talks about world expansion and world contraction, and many world expansions and contractions.

I understand that as referring to this physical world, or perhaps the arising of different planets, or the different eras that this planet Earth has been through—the ice age, whole species wiped out, enormous changes that have happened: meteors hitting, volcanoes, all kinds of turbulent processes going on already, and still ongoing.

For a long time I was living in that view of "well, it's all changing anyway, and the world is going to fall apart anyway at some point. That's how it is. That's how it's made." And that is true.

But I feel that to hold just that view is unbalanced, because while that is true, here we are in this situation. The Buddha spoke about the ultimate truth that everything is in a state of flux and the relative truth that a human being needs nurturing, needs food, needs to be careful when sick, needs to keep the ethical precepts so that we don't harm ourselves and others. This is paying attention to the immediate and the sentient.

I want to bring in the reality of the transience of all of this and that on an ultimate level, everything is okay. But on a sentient level, things are seriously not okay.

A story comes to mind of when the Buddha is wandering and goes to where there's a group of monks living together. There's one monk who's very sick with dysentery, lying in his own excrement. He's obviously been lying in his own excrement for days. He's sick and dirty and abandoned by the other monks.

The Buddha asks, "What's going on with this monk here? Why aren't you taking care of him?"

They say, "Well, he's really sick. He can't even go on alms round. He can't do anything. He's useless. So we're just leaving him."

We just leave him. He's of no use. He can't do anything.

So then the Buddha asks his attendant, "Please get me some water." And he gets some water and bathes this monk himself. He takes the dirty sheets away and gives him clean sheets and takes care of him with his own hands. And then he says to those monks, "You must take care of the sick, your sick monks, fellow monks, because when you leave the home life you don't have a family who will look after you anymore, so we have to look after each other."

To me that's a very clear message.

The Buddha gave detailed instruction on contemplation of death and the fact that we all die and the body decomposes and is made up of these elements—flesh and bones and blood. He gave very detailed teachings on this and on the different ways of looking at or approaching anatta or no-self. He gave very detailed teachings on this, but this didn't negate the fact that when somebody is sick and in need of help, we should help them.

So I see this as a very similar analogy.

Now we have this planet that is sick through the poisons that we've put out, which are motivated by greed, hatred and delusion—which are in themselves poisons. So that is the situation we're in. And we can say, "Well, it doesn't matter because everything's going to die anyway. It's all going to arise and cease anyway." But that isn't what the Buddha was pointing to. He was pointing to the care of the sentient realm within the context of understanding the ultimate.

So we have to kind of keep in mind both somehow. We have to make the mind big enough to take in both and not take a position on one or the other. And to remember in the midst of all of that to have the mudita, to look at the potential and the possibility and let that gladden our hearts in the midst of this work.

And maybe also we need to ask for forgiveness. I don't know how you resonate with that. But sometimes when I see what's going on, not that I've directly done something myself, but I just see something really horrendous going on and I just can't help but say, "Please forgive me." Because we're all part of the human race. We're all kind of in this together. And we do all have a part in what's playing out. And because of that, we can all have a part in how it can transform.

Even if that monk that the Buddha bathed died of dysentery a week later, if he was taken care of and bathed each day, and knew that he was cared for, then that's all okay. But if we neglect and turn away from that which needs our care, then we're not living up to our human potential and we're certainly not following the Buddha's instruction.

So that is the sharing from my heart tonight. I hope that your hearts also open to all of this even just a little bit and then a little bit more, and that you look at the ways that you can also influence the people in your own life and the people around you and the wider environment.

Thank you for listening.

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