Practicing in Times of Big Changes

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 35:05

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa. Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa. Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa.

Good morning, and thank you for inviting me to speak here today. This is a very beautiful place, and I was deeply moved by the request you made earlier.

I'd like to begin with a quote from Suzuki Roshi, the founding teacher of your lineage: "Everything is already perfect, but there's a lot of room for improvement." I've always found this to be a profound reflection on what we call in the Theravada school—and I've heard in the Tibetan school as well—the middle way, the middle path between two extremes. On one hand, ultimately everything is already perfect as it is. But conventionally, we often find ourselves unable to connect with that perfection, particularly when we're thrown about by afflictive emotions and when strong energies move through our body and mind. In such moments, it can be quite difficult to connect with the innate perfection of everything just as it is.

Because of the power of these disturbances, I have chosen to live this life in a way that provides strong support to help me hold steady in the midst of challenges—when greed, hatred, and delusion are triggered by different experiences, people, and relationships we encounter in the world. All of this can be included in practice, but remembering this when we are triggered is another matter entirely. We tend to forget that our whole life can be called an opportunity for practice, especially when it would actually be most beneficial to remember it.

In this day and age, I feel there is tremendous uncertainty. Of course, there is always uncertainty, but it has never been so much "in your face" as it is nowadays with the whole issue of climate change. We could reach a tipping point of what this planet can cope with at any moment—we don't know when it's going to happen, but it's something that's very much on the cards and could hit us at any time.

I believe having a strong practice has never been more important than it is right now, because there's really nowhere to go anymore. We can only wake up. That's the only place to go—within rather than without—because in the external world there isn't much space left. So much has been impacted by our greed, hatred, and delusion that the situation is looking quite dire.

Yet even this huge perspective—that we may be wiping ourselves off the planet—can be an opportunity for practice if we have enough wisdom and compassion to open up to it and not see it as something outside of practice. However, I think it's such a massive issue that many people still don't want to hear

about it. There's a lot of denial, and much misinformation comes to us through the media. To really sort this out, we need to take a genuine interest in what's happening.

In terms of the elements that come together to produce mind states for us, this isn't very different from other challenges we face. It's just that the magnitude of this particular situation is unprecedented.

Coming together as a group like this today to sit with this truth can be very powerful and empowering, because we are not alone in this—we are all in this together. Once we really take that to heart, I feel a new window of opportunity opens up, because this togetherness, this third refuge of sangha, is a very powerful agent for transformation and support.

Those of you here who have a regular practice are very fortunate in this time, because you have something to fall back on and something that helps make sense of the whole situation. This environmental crisis is something we have been co-creating with nature because we haven't truly understood how nature works. For quite some time, we've been doing things that have produced effects we never intended. Now we seem to be waking up to this reality as a society more and more.

People who have a spiritual practice tend to be quicker in picking things up because there is generally more capacity for sensitivity. You've been meditating for some time and have developed a certain understanding of how the mind works. You're generally less afraid of feeling, and that's a very good beginning, because we can connect to life only through feeling. If we cut ourselves off from feeling, we cut ourselves off from life. This disconnection from feeling is one of the main issues that has brought us to this environmental crisis.

Our culture has become quite cynical about feeling and cynical about the feminine aspect—which is present in all genders—the aspect that is open to feeling and able to hold both chaos and creativity. This aspect has been relegated to second place for hundreds of years because of the direction our evolution has taken. There's nobody to blame; it's simply how things have unfolded.

We are waking up to a time when we very much need this capacity to open to chaos and, in a sense, to admit defeat. We cannot control nature because we are part of nature. But we can get to know her, and we can make friends with her.

A practice like this is a technology for learning how to make friends with the laws of nature. By simply sitting down in the way you're doing and listening—listening to what nature has to say, what she has to tell us about how our minds work and how our bodies work—we gain increasing clarity. This clarity doesn't come from storing up more information or knowledge, but rather from tearing away veils of delusion, releasing certain assumptions we've held about the way things work that have turned out to be utterly misguided.

We have been polluting so much, yet that wasn't our intention. As a human species, we originally simply wanted to flourish and thrive. But somewhere along the way, our methods became disconnected from

wisdom, and now we find ourselves needing to reconnect with the deeper intelligence that practice can offer.

We originally intended to create abundance so everyone could share. But instead, we've created a severely polluted planet where resources are concentrated in the hands of very few, while countless people have nothing or very little. Our approach has failed because we operate from ignorance, not paying attention to how things truly work.

Now we face an enormous wake-up call. We've pushed nearly to the limits of what our planet can sustain. We're being forced to change our ways, which is perhaps fortunate—otherwise we might never have transformed.

Holding this reality in mind can serve as a sobering incentive for practice. We must trust that within the depths of our connection to life lies guidance—we need only develop the heart to listen. Someone truly connected to life's guidance is what I would call a wise being. They may have studied extensively, or they may not have. Wisdom isn't accumulated book knowledge or memorized suttas and instructions.

Wisdom is not a body of knowledge but a capacity to be with things as they are without overlaying concepts, allowing ourselves to be informed by the process we call nature without creating barriers. The Sanskrit word *prajña* illuminates this beautifully. *Jña* means knowledge, while *pra* adds a dynamic quality meaning "before." So wisdom literally means "before knowledge"—that moment when we encounter something before the mind begins thinking. This is when wisdom arises, when we're directly present with reality without imposing past stories.

These moments of being with things in their suchness cultivate wisdom. As we accumulate such moments, wisdom permeates our being, becoming part of who we are rather than something stored in the brain. When triggers arise, we don't need to recall that Buddha taught impermanence—we simply know it. This knowing provides less surface for difficulties to impact us. Wisdom makes us fluent and flowing rather than rigid, able to be with reality as it is.

This doesn't make us victims of circumstance. Rather, we recognize ourselves as part of nature, not separate from her. We participate in life's process without falling into extremes—the middle way between "everything is perfect" and "everything is terrible and out to get me." Most of us fluctuate between these poles. Some people, labeled bipolar, experience such extreme swings they can no longer function, but we all carry this tendency to some degree while managing to get by.

Our practice brings the pendulum to ever-smaller swings through insight into how things work. With less rigidity comes less surface to be disturbed. Equilibrium—*upekkhā* or equanimity—is one of the four *brah mavihāras*, the divine abidings. It results from wisdom while simultaneously providing ground for wisdom to grow.

When I first heard about the middle way, it captured my attention completely. I felt deeply drawn to this

teaching because I'd never considered such an approach. Like most young people, I was attracted to extremes, believing that standing out through extreme positions was admirable. Over the years, this approach becomes exhausting. Eventually, we may feel ready for a less challenging way of living. That's when I became ripe to truly hear and consider this teaching.

when I heard this about the middle way, it sounded so healing to me—that there's a possibility here to have somewhere to observe everything from.

The founder of the lineage I have been trained in, the forest tradition, was a Thai master named Ajahn Chah, who passed away in the 1990s. When people would ask him questions, he would say something to one person and then something completely different to another person. People would wonder, "What kind of teacher is this? He says this to you and this to me. It doesn't make any sense."

He would explain: if somebody goes too far to the right, he would say, go to the left. If somebody goes too far to the left, he would say, go to the right. When people were too much on one side of the extremes, he was simply guiding them back to the middle. This is the ground from which we can observe how life works, and through this observation we can grow in wisdom and compassion. It's not like going up, up, up, but rather going down, down, down into the depths of the process of life, allowing the process to reveal itself to us.

The foremost quality we need to develop for this is the willingness to be with feeling—which is not an easy thing to do. Living these very privileged lives in Western society, with all our conveniences, we are especially susceptible to having little tolerance for difficult feelings. We simply press a button here and press a button there—making it hotter, colder, this and that. We have very low tolerance.

In this time of impending great changes, we need to increase our tolerance for many things we haven't been thinking about much. We have all been schooled in a culture that believes in endless growth, endless improvement, endless "making it all better" and "making it all more." But we have reached a point where it's obvious things won't continue that way.

This is where we can consider ourselves very fortunate to have a practice and teaching that contains all the information we need to strengthen our capacity to be with the way things are and to learn from it. From that equilibrium—this equanimity which results from practice—comes wisdom and compassion that we can bring into our lives and share with others. It's a great privilege to be able to do that.

A precious human life coinciding with meeting a teaching like this is considered very fortunate. We can take solace from that. Whatever is going to happen next, at least we have a framework within which we can hold all of it.

I recently read a beautiful analogy about our situation called the butterfly story, which I'd like to share with you. Initially, a butterfly is a caterpillar. At one point in its existence, that caterpillar starts to overeat—consuming about three hundred times its body weight in a day. It begins to horrendously

overconsume. There's some comparison there with our culture as well.

The caterpillar overconsumes until it can't move anymore. It becomes very sluggish and heavy, then hangs itself from a tree or somewhere. The skin starts to harden and becomes what's called a chrysalis. The body of the caterpillar inside the chrysalis begins to dissolve into a soup. For a long time, it wasn't clear how one creature—a caterpillar—could transform into a butterfly.

But scientists discovered that during the lifetime of the caterpillar, there are so-called imaginal cells already built into the caterpillar's system. In the time of crisis, those imaginal cells start to wake up. Through the soup of the dissolved caterpillar, these imaginal cells multiply. At one point, there's a tipping point and the imaginal cells take over. A completely new creature—a butterfly—is formed, and eventually slips out of the chrysalis and flies away.

This is a beautiful analogy for when one worldview is breaking down. There are always some people who are those imaginal cells, coexisting with the old system for some time. At one point, the tipping point sets in, and they start to multiply very quickly and link up with each other. Then the new worldview—the butterfly—is born.

I recently heard that for a tipping point to occur, only seven percent of the population is needed. After that, there's no return. I find this very encouraging—it's not so many people, actually. We could all be those imaginal cells.

With the practice we have, we possess all the tools to strengthen ourselves so we can hold the friction that a change of worldview inevitably brings. We also develop the capacity to truly look at what's happening, because if you don't fully look at it, the change won't be born. Change comes from really seeing what's going on. The change isn't something we have to force—we simply have to take in what's happening, and then change is born out of seeing clearly.

But to see clearly, we have to look, and look long enough. We don't have to force ourselves, but simply see. Notice how quickly we need to do something else after looking at difficult information. Even if action needs to be taken, just notice that impulse. This is all part of the process—really noticing how we busy ourselves with things that may not be so important. See if there's an element of wanting to distract ourselves because we don't know what to do, and we think that because we don't know what to do, we shouldn't look.

Consider how the Buddha realized enlightenment. There's another beautiful analogy: when the Buddha was sitting under the Bodhi tree on the night of his enlightenment, various personifications of Mara came to him, hurling weapons against him and sending beautiful women and all manner of temptations.

And he just decided to simply sit there and not move. And then all of those assaults, those weapons, they turned into flowers. They turned into blessings because they were the soil for wisdom and compassion to grow out of.

If there's no experience, there's no process. There's no learning. We need those experiences. They are the soil for those flowers to grow. And whatever soil is there, that's what we have to work with. We don't have a choice about saying, "Oh, I want a different experience." We don't have a choice here. But we have total choice to really make the most out of it in terms of practice. This is where we have a choice.

And then, you know, if the internal changes, the external will change as well. And the climate crisis today is just like a reflection of the collective internal. It doesn't look very nice. But if we do our bit, we can contribute to that shift. And that's what I'd like to do, to the best of my abilities. And sometimes I also just go to sleep, but I try to at least be aware of it—that sometimes I just need to turn away from it and rest. That's okay too.

So there's not much time left, but if anybody would like to comment or ask a question, please feel free.

A participant asks about the distinction between emotions and feelings, and requests more explanation about vipassana as feeling being the main way to connect with our inner connection to other beings.

I think generally, how I understand it, feeling is a part of emotion. For example, a feeling arises, and then we're maybe not aware enough, not mindful enough, so we start thinking about it. And then it becomes an emotion. It starts with a feeling, and then we put thinking into it, and then it becomes a whole mix. Or sometimes it can be just thinking something, and then a feeling arises.

So feeling is more basic—there's neutral feeling, pleasant feeling, and unpleasant feeling. Neutral feeling we are mostly not aware of, but we are very aware of unpleasant feeling and pleasant feeling. Emotion is much more than just feeling. So anger, jealousy, infatuation—all of that are emotions, and feeling is just a part of it.

The emotions which are built up around pleasant feeling—we want more of those, isn't it? But what they all have is a quite deluding quality, because if we experience a certain situation or relationship through that veil of emotions, then we don't really experience what's there. It can be very colored, very selective. We pick up certain clues, but we don't see others, and then we just go down that road and maybe complicate our lives.

In terms of what I was saying about prajna, or pañña in the Pali language—it was very surprising for me to hear that pañña or prajna is not a body of knowledge, but the capacity to be with suchness, to be with the way things are. And in any moment, we can be fully with experience as it is without putting something on top of it. We actually are collecting information about the way things truly are.

That's what we do in formal meditation first, but then ideally we bring that into our daily lives. And then, when a certain amount of information is collected, at one point it shifts into an insight. Suddenly you see into the depths of something, or you see the connections of something, and then you have an insight. If that's a really deep insight, it can be what you call satori in Zen—then it becomes something which is a permanent change of the consciousness of that being. There might be certain what we call in Pali language

"fetters"—which bind us to the wheel of becoming, of being born in ignorance again and again.

And then if there are certain insights which are very deep, some of those fetters are cut off permanently. And then these kinds of delusions won't be produced any longer. And then there is more capacity to be with the way things are, if some of those delusions fall away permanently.

I don't know if you have observed it in your own life, but what is the most difficult element to be with is very strong feelings. And in what's called the dependent origination...

It's at feeling where that wheel of becoming can be stopped. When feeling becomes grasping, attaching and grasping—this is where, if we wake up to it, we can step out. But if we don't let go, then we become it, and then we'll be born into aging, sickness and death. We're already down the drain.

So it's at feeling where we can step out—at the junction of feeling and attaching. If we can wake up to that moment when the feeling comes... but this is a very fast process. When the feeling arises, when the attaching or the pushing away begins—when that reaction, the very nature of reaction, occurs—if we notice it with mindfulness, there we can step out.

But if we don't step out there, then we are just... we're already becoming it. We're already the angry one who has been saying those things. But if we notice the contraction in the body, the heat coming up, the thoughts—if we notice it in that moment—we can still step out.

This is the precious opportunity that each moment offers us: to wake up at the very point where suffering is born, to step out of the wheel of becoming through the power of mindful awareness. In this stepping out, we find our freedom.

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