Practice & Climate Change

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 49:05

A great sense of honor and privilege to come together in this way and have a dedicated space for practice. We're very fortunate to be able to take the time out of our lives to do this, to contemplate the Dharma and cultivate the Dharma. It can be a real refuge for us.

One of the things that a teacher who had a great influence in my life, Ajahn Chah, whom I met first in the UK and then in Thailand, used to say was: this practice is preparation. Preparation for when the passions touch the heart. In that moment, do we react and generate more suffering and complexity, either for ourselves or in the world around us, or can we pause and reflect and apply this training? Moments of gathering, moments of mindfulness, moments of wise reflection.

We practice in these containers that we have built together—the container of the retreat and the retreat place—so that we can have the quiet and the support to reflect inwardly and practice with just the simplicity of being with the day as it unfolds. Very simple things: feeling tired or feeling a bit dislocated, wanting to be here, not wanting to be here, feeling happy, not so happy. All the different kinds of changing moods—to see them come and go and to be able to apply this training of moments of being with the breath, being with the body, being with the reality of the moment and not being so distracted. Not moving out of our habits, particularly when it's uncomfortable and we just shift.

This is a training to be able to withstand impingement from the world around us and from our own internal psychodynamic material—whatever arises—to withstand that without defaulting to patterns of distraction, and through that building some capacity to be more fully here.

When we arrived yesterday at IMS, Kittisaro and I came from Tennessee. We traveled from Atlanta, flew to Boston, and were then driven here. When we woke up this morning, there was a note on the notice board from someone who hoped that during this retreat we would reflect on or give some perspective on practice and climate change.

This is probably one of the biggest issues that we're in the midst of: very compelling, very impactful, very serious, very threatening, very alarming. We practice to be with the reality of life, not to live in some kind of cloud that we float off on, but to actually be more able to be here and meet the moment—meet whatever arises within ourselves and in the world around us. We're not separating out from the world in this practice, but we're learning to have capacity so we can meet the world.

Rather than when we think of something like this, or we read more and more, see more and more, experience more and more what's happening to our earth, it can be very activating for us. It brings up a

lot of very strong feelings and reactions, and can activate deeper, sometimes quite primitive and early patterning to do with fear and overwhelm. That can really dislocate us from a sense of deeper sanity and well-being. It's very powerful—things that hit us. Like Ajahn Chah said, when things hit that are very strong, they activate us.

But we are here to practice, to learn that there are alternative ways of responding, that there are alternative resources within this heart and mind that we can draw from, that can resource us, that can support us in the face of whatever we might face, both personally and collectively.

One of the things that Einstein said is that we can't solve a problem from the same consciousness that created it. There has to be a shift somehow when we approach things in life. When we approach difficult things from the same mindset, we tend to just go round and round and round. Sometimes it's these shifts that can happen that bring about a shift in response that can change the whole picture and allow for something quantum-like to happen—some kind of shift that we didn't even know was possible because we've shifted our mindset.

Our usual conditioned mindset has been very much—our human consciousness has been very conditioned by this mind that objectifies, that goes out, this thinking mind. It's called mano-vijñāna in the Buddhist map of the mind: the mind, the vijñāna, the consciousness that goes out to name things. It's a very important aspect of our consciousness, of our awareness, of our mind. It helps us to differentiate and to name and to know and to be able to discern difference.

But it tends to become a way that we become addictively filtering our experience of life just through this primary capacity to objectify the world, and in the process of doing that, create this sense of separation—me and the other, whatever that other is. When there's that separateness, even at a subtle level or not so subtle level, then there's a whole dynamic between me and the other: liking, disliking, wanting, not wanting, fear, lust. It's quite complex within that field between me and the other.

So this mind that's constantly creating an object—when we create the objects of, say, the earth and others around us—we can sometimes in that process lose the reality, the deeper reality of awareness, this deeper dimension of the mind-heart which is aware, which is actually sensitive to and knows the reality of interconnection. That there is no ultimate other; we're part of each other.

The breath that I take in is the carbon dioxide the trees give out. The oxygen that the trees give out allows me to breathe. The food I take is from the earth. Every day is an affirmation that we're not apart from what we experience or see or name or experience through our senses as other than us, different than us. We're actually part of a whole unified web of life.

This is the Dharma: to really know that, not just intellectually—maybe we start there—but to really begin to feel that and ultimately to move from that reality. So to shift—this practice is helping us shift, not to judge how we are or to put down, but just to notice there's another dimension that we can awaken to.

We're awakening out of the obsessive objectifying mind that generates this feeling of separative consciousness that's connected with brilliance and creativity but is also connected with suffering and discontent. We're awakening into a deeper dimension. This practice is helping us to awaken into the reality of the seamlessness of the whole. This is a quantum shift.

So in this practice, when we're meeting whatever it is, whatever intensity—whether it's this very big picture that we're now in the midst of and will be for the rest of our lives, the changes happening due to the extreme release of carbon into the atmosphere and the effects of that, or whether it's in our personal life in smaller ways—whenever we meet intensity or difficulty or challenge, this practice does have a lot to offer.

I'd like to talk about three ways of thinking about what this practice can offer us, connected with what we've been doing today.

This practice offers us a whole range of skills and benefits. Let me explore three dimensions: refuge, resilience, and response.

As we begin to practice, we develop familiarity with refuge—a place, a way of abiding that is sustaining and nourishing, that can reorient us. The entry into the Buddhist path begins with this sense of orientation around refuge. Classically, we take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Initially this may seem like some formula that doesn't have much immediate resonance for us. But as we deepen the practice, these three dimensions reveal themselves as aspects of our own being.

At first they appear external to us. The Buddha as a historical, brilliant teacher who had insight into radical awakening and understanding—insights we're still contemplating two and a half thousand years later. He taught for forty years, challenging the status quo of his time as a revolutionary teacher who split the atom of consciousness and awakened. His resonance reaches us still today.

We can think of the Buddha historically, archetypally, or as those beings who inspire us. When I reflect on our years living and working in South Africa, I think of someone like Nelson Mandela, whose life inspired a whole country. I think of my grandmother, who was extraordinarily sweet and had all the time in the world. If I had come home saying, "Nan, I've just murdered someone," she would have said, "Well, never mind dear, have a cup of tea and we'll talk about it." Whatever you brought to her doorstep was workable—someone who inspires us. She wasn't a Buddha, perhaps, but she was a bodhisattva: someone with compassion, love, and kindness.

I think of our dog Jack, who lived with us for fifteen years as we established our small hermitage on the border of Lesotho. The local Zulus called him "Numsan"—"the man"—because he was such a presence. Retreatants would arrive with stress and difficulties, and he would simply move among them with tremendous love. During practice, he would sit on his cushion, and when we chanted—especially Kuan Yin chants—he would throw himself on his back with legs in the air, making everyone laugh. If he didn't

like the Dharma talk, he would get up, shake his collar, and walk out. He was an excellent teacher.

These beings, in whatever forms they come, inspire us. They are the energy that keeps us going.

The Dharma encompasses both the classical teachings—profound, brilliant, well-worn teachings practiced across generations—and the immediate Dharma of everything around us. I wouldn't have known how to practice samadhi, how to return to breath and body, if someone hadn't taught me. They could teach because they had received the teaching themselves—this entire lineage of Dharma teachings that inspire us.

More immediately, everything expresses itself according to Dharma. Nothing exists apart from Dharma nature. Everything teaches us: the trees, the moods of the heart, different people, the various unfoldings in the world. All of it becomes something we can contemplate and be with.

In Sangha, we discover that we can practice. We're not merely leaves in the wind. Whatever arises, we can practice. We can apply mindfulness, reflect wisely, discern clearly, and respond rather than react.

This refuge is an inner orientation we can align with again and again in each present moment. We practice returning, so that when life strikes in a big way or things happen, we know how to come back. We have refuge—an inner refuge not dependent on circumstances around us.

The Buddha also taught the refuge of ethics, of knowing how to align ourselves—as we reflected last night before entering retreat on the five great gifts.

Buddha called the five precepts the great gifts that offer freedom from oppression, freedom from fear, internally and externally. This ethical base is not dependent on external social or religious morals. In fact, often social and religious so-called morals are in direct conflict with an internal ethic. When that conflict arises and there's manipulation of behavior, if we don't have an internal ethic, we can find ourselves getting caught up in unwholesome actions. The karma from that can be very difficult.

To have this inner compass is what the Buddha called the *hiri* and *ottappa* - the conscience that can feel and is sensitive to when we move out of alignment with harmony with the Dharma. When we do or say something that was perhaps not skillful, we can feel that. There's a sensation: that didn't really go very well. We feel that and realign ourselves from that information without creating the sense of me as a guilty or bad person. It's much more dispassionate than that. That wasn't very skillful. That speech was hurtful, or that action was colored and tainted and manipulative in some way. I feel that and it informs me to be more careful.

The *ottappa* is having a sense of wholesome fear. If the mind suddenly gets activated into violence and you feel like you want to do something really outrageous - you're filled with hatred and want to act out of that - then something, when the conscience is working in a purified state, will arise like an internal red light and say, "That's not good. That's damaging. It's going to damage you, damage someone else. Just

restrain. Hold back. Wait. Be patient."

The Buddha said these are the guardians of the world - these inner capacities for conscience. This is our internal ethic, and it becomes an internal compass for us, something we can rely on. It's very important in our world when there are so many influences, so many ways that human consciousness is hijacked and distorted and pushed into unwholesome actions of body, speech, and mind.

When Aung San Suu Kyi was under house arrest for many years as she stood for freedom in Burma, one of the things she said was that however much the state machinery oppresses, courage arises again and again. It can never destroy this inner courage, this inner strength, because this is the nature of the deepest heart. This is our deeper nature. It has courage. It's fearless. Yes, we can feel fear, we can feel the loss of courage, but we can return and know our refuge and know that there is capacity. It's been demonstrated by many inspiring people through time facing all sorts of different difficulties within society.

This practice of resilience is part of what we've been doing today - learning in a very simple way to gather, to know that when there is this capacity for *samadhi*, for gathering, there is a strengthening. From the very simple activity of moments of awareness, moments of mindfulness, moments of just being with one breath at a time, gradually there is this unification that starts to happen.

The gathering of the body starts to be illuminated with the energy of the mind. As the mind - this mental energy that's so fickle - starts to steady on the slow rhythm of the body, the mind starts to calm and the body starts to illuminate and digest some of the stress that it carries. Some of the undigested emotional material that is carried at the felt sense level starts to be digested by this *samadhi*, this gathering, and clears out our bodily experience energetically.

Then the mind begins - this mental faculty that's untrained and gets very colored by whatever state we experience - to steady and calm on the rhythm of the body. This is a unification, a steadiness. It's very pleasant, very pleasing as this is developed. It becomes an abiding that we can cultivate and return to - this inner steadiness, this singleness of focus in the moment.

This is a great skill to practice little by little, planting the seeds so that whatever arises in the field of our experience, when it hits the mind in that moment, hits the heart, touches the body, we feel it as sensitive beings. We can feel the effect of that. But then there's a moment: do we react? Do we act out of our activation and our patterning? Or can we digest? Can we pause? Can we take a breath? Maybe even one moment of taking a mindful breath may be the difference between creating heaven and hell in that moment.

One great Thai meditation master, Ajahn Tate, said that this practice is to discern the difference between mind and the activity of mind.

This is to discern between the *citta*, the awareness—the fundamental nature of mind that is aware. It has this knowing quality; it's untainted, luminous, reflective, discerning, clear. To know the difference

between this undifferentiated awareness, this presence, and the activity—the mental activity, the movement of what's coming and going—to know the difference, to discern, and to be able to awaken into and recognize and touch, through the simple practice of returning one breath at a time, that which is unmoving, that which is aware, just present as a refuge, as a reference, as a point of well-being in the midst of whatever is happening.

When we think of something like climate change—we're in that reality now—it activates so many strong, destabilizing feelings: dread and fear and outrage, denial, dissociation, anxiety, all of these affects. And if we don't know the difference between that which can know what is arising but not be overwhelmed by what is arising, if we don't know this refuge, this place of returning, this practice, then we can just completely freak out and lose any capacity to respond from a place of clarity.

We're living at a time—we've always lived it, the world's always been unstable—but whatever we've understood as stable is really in question. That is something we can't rely on in perhaps the ways we have done in our world. We're living in circumstances where the chances and the likelihood of whatever's been stable for us, whatever we've relied on, is increasingly becoming unstable. So it's frightening, it's difficult.

Ajahn Chah would always say that if we look for certainty in the uncertain, then we're bound to suffer. We have created a culture and society where we've really tried to create certainty, and yet reality is uncertain—whether it's the reality of our life or our relationships or our economic status or our work or even our moods. But that's one thing. To even begin to take on board the instability of the elements that we're now experiencing—that's a whole other realm, a whole other heightened intensity.

So it means we have to really take this seriously in terms of our practice, to really take seriously and realize it's important that we use this time well, these times that we have to gather, to sow the seeds through this moment-by-moment simple practice that will support well-being, so whatever arises, we can meet it.

There's a poem you must know, "The Guest House" by Rumi: "This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival—a joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor." I don't remember the lines exactly, but you get my drift—"Meet them at the door laughing." Well, it's not always easy to laugh at what we meet, what we might meet and what we are meeting. It's not easy, but this is an aspect of the practice: to know that actually, whatever is arising, there's still this dimension that we can awaken to that is okay.

Or as one of our teachers from Sri Lanka, Godwin Samararatna—I find it difficult to pronounce—would say: "Okay, even when it's not okay." It's not okay, but we can be okay because we know how to return. Even within this heart, this unified heart, it's blissful. It's the place that the Buddha said is more pleasurable than any sense pleasure.

This practice sows the seeds for profound joy. Gathered mind and heart, focused, absorbed, connected,

rooted, steadied—it's a very pleasant abiding. It's a very healing abiding. So it's worth cultivating, and it's also an abiding that helps to strengthen us. So that gathered mind that's infused with steadiness, with this practice, when that is turned to whatever it's turned to, whatever touches us, then it's a very different experience than when we're touched by fear or dread and then just get overwhelmed and washed away and reactive.

So it's not easy. This isn't an easy practice. In fact, another great Thai meditation master who's considered a great master of *samadhi*, Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo, would make an analogy. He said this path, this path of awakening, is a bit like you're building a bridge from one shore to another. It's just an analogy—in some ways the shore that we're on and the shore that we're going to is always here. But it's just an analogy that we're moving; this path is a movement. It's a movement, a transformative process from a place of suffering and constriction and reactivity and stress, transformed into gatheredness, wise reflection, engaging whatever's presenting itself rather than being caught in a reactive experience.

So this is like building a bridge from one shore to another, and that bridge has to have supports. You build a support on the near bank and on the far bank, and those supports you can plunge down into the earth. You can see the earth; you can plunge those supports. But then that middle support—you've got to plunge it down through a fast-flowing river. That's difficult to do. I mean, I'm not an engineer, but I can imagine that would be more complicated.

And it's in the same way with this path, this transformative path that we're practicing. The near bank is the cultivation of ethics, *sila*, refuge—all of these wholesome qualities. And then that far bank is the wisdom aspect, that which can wisely reflect and notice things are changing, notice "It's like this in this moment. What is my relationship to how it is?" Can adjust, can apply inquiry. But those, he said, in some ways are accessible to us and in some ways easier.

Perhaps that's maybe relatively so. But the middle pillar, he made the analogy to this practice of samadhi, of gathering, which is in a way more patient and challenging work because of the fickle nature of the mind. It's always slipping away because of the momentum of our patterns. The patterns and habits are so powerful that when we sit here we just feel the momentum of that, always pulling. The mind is always like the asavas, always flooding out into our thinking, into our stories, into our distractions, into our wanting not to be here, into our wanting to be somewhere else, whatever it is.

And so plunging and encouraging and returning again and again to the very simple practice of moments of just being here with something that seems to be pretty boring perhaps at first—like one breath—that is challenging. That is not an easy thing to do, to sink that middle pillar.

So this is what we're doing today, what we're gathering. But it is a very vital pillar, because when that samadhi, when that gatheredness starts to really strengthen and become a strong base for practice, then it gives us a lot of capacity.

This capacity, this support in samadhi practice helps us to begin to discern between the activity of the mind and that which is just aware. We've all today experienced a lot of activity—a lot of different feelings, often different body states, a lot of different moods—and yet there is that which is aware, which is present to the experience. It's illuminating the experience actually. We know the experience without this fundamental awareness, this fundamental knowingness.

So to be able to discern that and to gather—gather the body through the mindfulness of the breath into the awareness, to gather the feeling tones of the heart however disparate, however tinged they might be sometimes with pain, to gather those into the awareness, to gather this mental activity into the awareness, to suffuse the awareness through these bodies, energy bodies and physical body, mind body, heart.

This samadhi is supported by many different factors, but one very helpful dharma principle—not only for supporting this practice but also as we talk about how to practice for the times we're in and the increasing destabilization of the elements due to climate change, due to increased destabilization that's creating all the effects of undermining stability and generating migration, beginning to create conflict, resource conflict, wars, beginning to create unpredictable and increased weather patterns, acidification of the oceans, diminishing of food availability. All of these things are beginning to become the world that we're moving into.

So how can we meet this? One of the dharma principles that's very important for us in these times and in our practice—both supporting this moment-by-moment cultivation of attention and for training to meet our lives, whatever our lives are, the bigger context of what's happening globally and then our personal lives, our community lives—is this principle of what's called in Buddhism nekkhamma, which means to simplify, it means to renounce, it means to know how to let go, how to put down.

Rather than—sometimes we can think that sounds like a bit of a drag, to renounce things, to say no to things—but actually in some ways it's saying yes. When you say no, it's saying yes to "there's enough here." To know what is enough is actually a very powerful place to be in, to be free from the conditioning of ever consuming, ever wanting, ever grasping, which leaves us in a weakened, disparate place. It's not our natural state, in fact. Yes, we have desire and needs, but to be always activated into needing more and more and more as an addictive pattern is not natural. It's not our natural health and sanity.

So to simplify is to know we can return to our natural health, our inner capacity for well-being. This works in both very subtle ways—to inwardly be willing, like even the moment of training your mind, train your attention to come to a breath as a moment of renunciation. Give your mind—no, "I want to think about this. I really want to think, it's really important that I kind of chew over that resentment a bit more. What they did, you know." So when you say, "Just put that down," it's a renunciation of ill will or renunciation of having to get right or get back or renunciation of the distracted mind, fantasizing mind.

So even on that subtle level, it's a strength that we're building. The fruit of that can become quite tangible in a retreat experience because then we start to actually connect with more contentment. We realize that

something we've just overlooked—the boring breath, another meal, oh, another tree out there—can actually become a source of great fulfillment. You sometimes see yogis just staring at the trees or really enjoying their food because as there's a simplification, there's a sort of heightening of the senses, an appreciation for what is. One breath can be so fulfilling for us. This is a training because it's not usually how the mind works.

Or in our life, to practice: what can we give away? What can we—all the stuff, we have so much stuff—what can we let go of? I feel like I'm in a constant losing battle trying to trim things down because stuff just accumulates. I spent a few months cleaning out our place. There's not actually a lot in there, but it's still enough stuff. Packed it all up: some to the recycling, some to the dump, some to pass on. And I noticed it still seems to accumulate.

So it's a real practice to just keep—there's something about just being able to not be stuck to stuff, to be able to be that fluid. If we needed to leave our stuff, could we just leave it? So this is something we can contemplate. We can practice it and we can contemplate it, just so that there's that sharpness and aliveness of not having to hold so much in our minds and physically. To realize we can live quite simply.

This is one of the encouragements of the Buddha. It's one of the lifestyles he demonstrated in his life: to live very simply, in harmony with nature. To let go—this is what our teacher Ajahn Chah would always talk about—to practice with the mind that lets go, even when we're sitting here, rather than practice with the mind that's trying to attain something.

He said that regardless of time and place, the whole practice of the Dharma comes to completion at the place where there is nothing. It is the place of surrender, of emptiness, of laying down the burden. This is the finish. This is the finish. Coming to this place.

Actually, this is our reality. All of the other stuff is arbitrary in a way. The reality in the moment is the place of nothingness. It's the place of emptying. So when we come back to our one breath in this moment, we're really coming back to an emptying. We're coming back to this simplification, this letting go, this renouncing.

And that's why in some ways it's quite hard because we want to fill ourselves up with stuff—our thoughts and our feelings and our stories and our possessions and our roles and what we've got to do. But it's also a great relief to realize, and I'd like to encourage us, and I'm encouraging myself as well in this practice, because it is a practice that's ongoing. One doesn't just somehow snap out of one's habits. Mostly, for most of us, it's an ongoing practice to explore this willingness to enter into this place of nakedness really—the naked moment, the naked moment of awareness, of our presence, our truth behind all the layers and the patternings of the self, getting somewhere, fearing things, upset about things.

So this being able to surrender, as Ajahn Chah taught, to open into that inner space—it's a place of trust. We then are entering into this dimension that we're awakening into, this profound, alive, aware

intelligence of the presence of the knowing of the heart. We're awakening into that.

And then when we listen into that, this is the place of the shift of consciousness. This is the place where we're listening together. I'm listening to that place. I'm listening inwardly, stripping away all of the layers of my stuff into the nakedness of my heart, the awareness here and now. You're listening. We're listening together. The world is listening. The earth is listening.

And it's from this place that response can emerge. A different kind of response, maybe. A response that's not splitting the world up into ten thousand things and creating more aversion.

My friend that I practice with, when she lost her child, the child died as a baby, and when I asked her years later how it was for her now, how she was with that very life-transforming experience of loss, how was she coping? And she said, "You know, when I think about my baby, I feel this tremendous grief. Of course, one would. I feel that anguish of loss. But when I return to my listening heart, to this place, this gathered refuge, this awareness—my child is listening there too. It's the place where we meet. It's where we hear a deeper intelligence. Where we hear the place where all things, as Ajahn Chah said, where they finish."

And it's the place of true response, whatever that response may be. I don't know how we will respond, how you will respond, how I will respond in the times we're in. That's for us to explore—many different kinds of response, whether it's to sit on a mountaintop spreading metta, whether it's to scream at the gates of the White House, whatever it is, this is our response. But can we do it from this heart, from this listening, from this resourcefulness? Can we do it at the door that can laugh, welcoming whatever is here rather than freaking out? Can we do it from a place that contributes to healing rather than continues to split?

This is a challenge. The heart that was demonstrated by Aung San Suu Kyi or Nelson Mandela. So whatever—we don't know. We don't know how it's going to turn out. We don't know. Some people say this sort of time we're in, it's like an excruciating. It's like a crucifixion. Maybe it's bringing forth a new birth.

Maybe that's the picture—that we're evolving something. I hope so. I love that possibility. But maybe not. Maybe it's the great sixth extinction. Who knows? We don't know. We're on the cusp.

But what we can know, what we can do, is turn very simply to this breath and know that we're planting the seeds of our capacity to maintain our sanity, our well-being, our strength, our refuge, our resiliency. All of that will inform whatever response emerges in the conditions we meet.

Ajahn Chah said that this activity of the mind—this mind-world, which are the same thing on some level—is like a cobra. Whether it's good or bad, liked or disliked, when you grasp it, it will poison you. It will affect you with longing and desire or with aversion and resistance. So you must know this mind, you must know this activity of the mind. Whatever it is, whether it's good or whether it's not good, watch it arise and pass. When you can do that, you will know peace—the peace that remains. This peace you can

rely on.

This peace of our heart is present here and can be with whatever's unfolding. This peace we can rely on, whatever arises, whatever we meet, whatever responses are taken. We know how to return to this deeper peace.

This is our practice. This is why we do, as Ajahn Chah said, this difficult practice—to prepare, little by little, to plant the seeds. Moment by moment, each moment we return to the breath, we plant the seeds of our sanity, of our well-being, of our capacity. We plant the seeds of our awakening. We plant the seeds of our ability to be here together, listening within the times we're in and cultivating from that listening the optimum response that each of us can make.

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