

Dharma talk December 12, 2015

On listening to a dharma talk:

Practice listening passively. You will hear, you will understand that which is useful to you. The rest can just pass you by. Just listening. There are no words you need to hold on to.

On a retreat, we can make a decision to allow any commentary, any rumination, and any conclusion, to be as substantive as a dream. This is the lab. It is the time to turn the attention to how the stream of our own consciousness gets stuck in well-worn routines, always leading us to the same claustrophobic internal space. Feelings and thoughts are assumed, as if they were definitive. This is our opportunity to see through that, and let no feeling, no idea, be appear as if it were a final truth.

It is a time to unwrap how consciousness habitually functions. How do we become so mesmerized? How do we become stuck at the same dead end, and yet that same old conclusion feel as if it were a brand new insight? How do our desires and avoidances lead us around so predictably?

I was visiting an old, dear friend at an Alzheimer's unit. Her kids had been called numerous times because the staff would find her in bed with a gentleman friend. While we were sitting around together, playing gin rummy in the facility, I saw her catch the eye of one of her buddies. She slyly got up and started to walk with him. I stealthily moved in and got in pace beside her. She gave me one of those side-ways, once-over looks out of the corner of her eye, and hoarsely whispered, "You're on to me." It was a very funny moment.

And this is our job. We need to become "onto ourselves". When do we get up from what we are focused on, and just follow our desires no matter where they lead? No matter how much trouble they cause? Can we pay close enough attention, with some fondness for ourselves, and watch ourselves be hooked by something shiny and bright, or some favorite darkness?

This is at once the simplest and hardest task.

We are designed to run on habit. We don't like having our assumptions questioned. That is scary. Who are we without those implicit rules of perception? Who are we without our mindless drives to avoid what causes us discomfort? Who are we when we don't chase what we think we want?

We are asking ourselves to unwrap our mind habits, and start observing the fabric of the predicable universe, and know we have created it. We are asking ourselves to observe the rules that order our world, how we judge others and ourselves. Who would we be without those rules? We don't want to know how our well-constructed defense systems automatically attempt to protect us. Our

defenses will counter-attack any attempt to reveal itself in action, and claim to be the really-real in order to keep us from feeling that which is historically too hard to know. That is their job.

The structure of a retreat, this retreat, is a container, which holds this process of waking to ourselves with great compassion. We have the stability of the schedule and the form. We have stability within the breath within our bodies. Gravity is dependable. We are held by the community. So the worries and anxiety that may naturally arise in this process can be held and known as that which normally comes and goes during the course of time.

Any of the hindrances can surface as defenses against knowing something new, coming to our rescue. Not just flurry and worry, but also ill will and hate, sloth and torpor, or doubt. All of them, any of them, all your favorites can step in and protect you from feeling and knowing what we habitually don't know. Our task is to notice the process.

And as we become intimate with that process, there begins to be an unwrapping that occurs on its own...this is how *dharma* functions...and once in a while we don't fall in the trap of the hindrances....a little bit at a time....this is a practice...knowing your favorite hindrances, so entrancing, going back to the breath, dipping your toe into the continuous stream of phenomena...letting something new happen...developing trust in the process.

And then one of the things that can happen is that fear surfaces.

Krishnamurti writes: "We are boiling with fear all the time."

Is that true?

Look and see if that is true.

What happens when we don't avoid feeling?

Space opens up.

How can we work with fear *if* it arises in the space that opens up?

Fear can become attached to a specific something and take on a life of its own, and function like any of the hindrances. "I am afraid I am doing permanent damage to my leg which has fallen asleep." "I am afraid that Rhonda forgot to ring the bell." "I am afraid that I am going to explode because the person next to me is fidgety." "I am afraid I am going to lose my mind."

Fear can make a lot of noise. We can learn to see the way fear works and the way we empower it. It takes skillfulness...experimenting with the small fears that show up here...being able to feel it, practicing compassion, understanding its

temporary quality. We can become more at ease with fear itself, as we hang in there with it, over and over again.

It takes skillfulness in experimentation. We can strategically withdraw when fear becomes too strong, when we don't feel able to deal with it, and move the attention back to the stability of the breath, or practice loving-kindness in that moment. That can be a helpful when learning to stand feeling fear. You can make a choice to deliberately turn the attention to something that will soothe.

A moment will eventually arise when it is possible not to turn away from fear-as-it-is, and we should learn how not to miss that moment. This is part of the training, part of the practice. We become more at ease with fear.

Fear can also be non-specific. It might appear as anxiety. There is no specific object of alarm, or anything you can do about it to fix it. The anxiety, of course, can then become an object of fear.

Or you can stay with the anxiety itself. As a sensation.

Is the body held in a frozen position? Braced?

What is the breath up to?

Is there a feeling of being raw?

Does it naturally unwind itself?

There is nothing you need to do about it.

And as we penetrate fear, and then non-specific anxiety from which fear sometimes arises, we come to understand the first noble truth.

There is *dukkha*. There is suffering. A better translation is: there is basic unsatisfactoriness, which pervades all forms of existence. It is universal because all forms of life are always changing, impermanent, and without any inherent substance. The sense of *dukkha* inevitably arises as we yield to the endless flow of phenomena and discover the insubstantial nature of this self we have cobbled together through our habitual perceptions.

The fear and anxiety can be a screen between awareness and *dukkha*. *Dukkha* is a basic truth. It points to the universality of suffering. We are afraid of *dukkha*; we are afraid of the sense of inherent unsatisfactoriness; we are afraid of the discomfort it is. And this fear helps lead us to a new understanding of *dukkha*.

Fear can act like a screen shielding us from all this pervasive undercurrent of dissatisfaction. Not avoiding fear can lead us to *dukkha*.

Dukkha is a basic frustration we are never able to solve. It is intrinsically tied to the dismantling of the conditioned nature of the fabricated self.

First we have a primary sensation: hearing, seeing, feeling, tasting... Then we have our perception of that sensation: we like it; we don't like it; it is neutral. This is the first principal habit. The impression is formed automatically, and immediately, this perception leads to clinging and aversion. These habits get formed out of our experiences and they become the limited repertoire of our world.

Clinging and aversion begin at the moment of perception, immediately after sense contact. And then begins the cascade of our usual delusions about whatever we perceived. This is a basic operating principle we cannot change.

The first thing that happens with the evaluation of sense contact, of "like it, don't like it, is the creation of separateness, of subject and object. The "I" to the 'it' or 'them'. Inherent in that separation is a sense of lack of direct contact. I perceive this. I am separate from this.

This is inescapable.

And we continue to crave direct contact with no separation. We long for that sense of being at peace, of being whole, of communion.

And this is also true. This is the *dharma* that leads to the end of suffering. This leads to the answered longing.

But first we necessarily must embrace, include, the fact of *dukkha*. This is part of the whole.

With *dukkha* there is a "lack" of something that shows up instantaneously in the field of the sensate. This is the very awful feeling that we want to shield our self from. We have a feeling of emptiness, of un-groundedness as we realize the contrivance of our notion of "I am this". All notions are inherently empty.

"Thirst" or "desire" is the cause of *dukkha*. It is in our nature to crave.

The impossible quest to ceaselessly fulfill or escape desire drives us mad.

And yet desire causes us to sit here cultivating the capacity to simply be awake without object, without objective.

The key is moving from 'lack of...something...fill in the blank', to the sense of the feeling of lack without an object, to the sense of *dukkha* itself. Lack exists without an object. The sense of lack is *dukkha*.

Dukkha shows up between the moment of 'should' and 'ought' to and 'if only', and willfulness...and on the way to slipping into simply being.

Here is *dhukkha*, that basic sense of dissatisfaction. We have been defended against it, and it has driven our lives.

When I stop trying to fill up that hole of endless dissatisfaction, by vindicating or realizing myself in some symbolic way, something happens to it, and to me.

When I let go of the mental devices that sustain my self-esteem, something new arises.

And we learn there is a way out of suffering. And this takes the trust we have been cultivating all along. Trusting the yielding itself.

This moment of *dukkha* is the opportunity. That emptiness at the core of the self...that sense of lack... if we can continue on and let go and yield to it, then what arises is the source of our creativity, our spirituality. The emptiness is not what we feared. It is something else, something formless, that we cannot grasp.

We practice trusting learning how to yield, and we cannot make the yielding happen.

We engage or play with the thought processes that arise in an interested and non-attached way. The idea isn't to get rid of all language; it's to be free within language. The freedom from fixed ideas does not happen when we wipe away all thoughts: instead it happens when we are not clinging to, nor stuck in any particular thought system. We are not looking for a mind that clings to an empty blue sky. We are cultivating minds that are flexible and nimble.

A consciousness that seeks to ground itself by fixating on something in particular dooms itself to perpetual dissatisfaction, for the impermanence of all phenomena means it cannot be found. A sense of lack, being ill-at-ease, compels us to seek such a perch. The end of suffering involves a different moment-to-moment perspective. The solution is a different way of experiencing the problem. We include emptiness. The empty mind, is not blank, but full of possibility. It that can become anything, because it does not need to become something.

This moment is the opportunity. There is nothing to grasp.

We are expanding the field of awareness, to liberate thought from fixation. Emptiness is full of all possibilities.

And then, of course, emptiness will take on a form, which limits possibilities. Again and again.

We continuously get mesmerized so we can continuously yield.

The “I” of the narrator of experience drops away, just for a moment. That moment only comes about as we stop being defended against suffering, and come to include it.

Goenka said,

“when I say I am aware of this object, and “I” is there, “I” am aware of this. This is a duality. Slowly as you proceed, “I” goes away. Things are just happening, and the knowing part knows. That’s all.”

Thoughtlessness suggests blankness of mind, but that is not accurate.

“Thoughtlessness is to see and know all things with a mind free from attachment. When in use it pervades everywhere, and yet it sticks nowhere...When our mind works freely without any hindrance, and it is at liberty to come and to go, we attain liberation.” (Ch’an master Hui-neng, 6th patriarch)

In this lab, during this retreat, we can work with the assumption that any rumination, any conclusion is as substantive as a dream. And then look to see what else is present.

We practice trusting, learning to yield, and yet cannot make the yielding happen.

The more we survive fear and anxiety, watching it come and go, and we have the experience of surviving it, the more we cultivate trust. Our trust can include the feeling of fear and anxiety.

We practice being aware of our motivations. Are they greed, ill will, and delusions? Or generosity, loving kindness, and wisdom.

Our motivations are rarely pure.

Gracious loving kindness can be an antidote to raw fear or anxiety, and part of the practice.

We include the naturalness of our own imperfection....we include all of this in the stream of consciousness.

This opportunity is the gift we give each other in this silence we hold in communion.

Thank you.

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