Don't Take Your Life Personally

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Welcoming Everything

Notice that having breakfast and talking stimulates and stirs up the mind. So now is the opportunity to observe this. Just notice it without trying to do anything about it. Witness this sense of having eaten breakfast and having talked to people, and the result is 'like this'. You are noticing the way it is. It is not a matter of approving or disapproving of anything, but of just noticing this awakened state where there is awareness. And it is intelligent; it knows the way it is. There are no comments about it in terms of how it should or should not be; it is just noticing that *this* is the way it is. So there is this attitude of welcoming rather than of being caught up in a habit pattern of trying to control or get rid of, or trying to attain some particular mental state.

People sometimes want to recreate blissful *samadhi* experiences they remember having had on past retreats. They try to make them happen again by attempting to suppress thought or control things. The point is, awareness includes everything, so it isn't a matter of thinking you shouldn't desire anything, that you should just sit there and not have any desires; that would be coming from an ideal again, an ideal of how things should be. So, in awareness, we are not operating from comparing the reality of this moment with an ideal, but rather of accepting and welcoming the way it is — even if we don't like the way it is. It isn't a matter of liking, but of learning to welcome even what we don't like and don't want.

Years ago I developed a welcoming practice. This is because I am someone who finds welcoming — particularly in the case of certain mental states — very difficult. There are states I don't like and habitually reject. I have this sense of just pushing them away, just doing this to life, kind of pushing them away. This was my — what would you call it? — approach to life? Anyway, my approach was to not let it approach. So then this sense of welcoming occurred to me as a way of remembering not to reject mental states. It wasn't that I had intended to reject them when they came; it was just force of habit. So then the intention was to welcome even what I didn't like or didn't want — those unpleasant mental states, those difficult situations.

In the Theravada tradition we have this word *'metta'* (loving-kindness), and *metta* is about welcoming everything. There is nothing divisive or critical in *metta*. When you develop *metta*, therefore, it is towards everything in the universe. You have *metta* for the devils, the demons, the angels, the enemy, the friends, the mosquitos, flies, germs, birds, the precious little kittens and the beloved doggies — everything. There is no preference. It is not a question of saying, 'I want 90% of *metta* to go to *this* person and about 1.1% to go to the demons'. You are not being picky about it. It is welcoming conditioned phenomena totally — the whole range from heaven to hell, from the best to the worst.

So what is the effect on your mind when you start developing this attitude of loving-kindness *(metta)*? It counterbalances your critical tendencies, doesn't it? Your critical mind excludes things — 'This is better than that. This is how it should be, not that. This person I approve of, but this one I don't. There shouldn't be these evil people.

There shouldn't be criminals. There shouldn't be paedophiles. There shouldn't be this, there should only be that.' You can get caught up in personal preferences and weighing one thing against the other. But *metta* is not critical and it is not idealistic, it is not generating a loving quality towards everything in the sense of liking or approving of it. Liking depends on conditions having to be such that you like them. *Metta* is more like unconditional love. It is this welcoming, a kind of generosity, an uncritical acceptance of the whole range of phenomena in whatever form it takes.

As many of you know, we develop *metta* beginning with ourselves. The formula we use is something like: 'May I abide in wellbeing.' So the first part of the practice is always directed towards yourself, just learning to accept yourself for what you are. That means welcoming and accepting everything about yourself — your dark side, your good side, your bright side, your stupid side, your evil side, whatever — learning to accept uncritically even the things you really don't like about yourself. And this I found most difficult. My critical faculties are not all that rampant when turned outward, but they tend to go into a tirade when turned inward. I am much more critical of myself than of anyone else.

So, 'May I abide in wellbeing' is a reminder of wishing well to this being here, this condition, this human body, this person with its habits and emotions, whatever they are. Rather than endlessly thinking you have to get rid of things because you shouldn't be this way, you shouldn't feel like this, there is a sense of welcoming even something very unpleasant. So *metta* allows all things because they belong. Everything belongs in this moment because it is here, it is like this. If I come along and say 'this shouldn't be here' that is my personal sense of not wanting something. The reality of the moment, however, is that because it is here, it belongs.

One thing I found when living in Asia was this sense of belonging — even though I am an obvious foreigner — and this used to baffle me. I have lived in India, Malaysia and Thailand. And in all those countries I have felt at home; I always felt as though I belonged. Yet, in many ways, I didn't. There I was, a big white man living in a Forest monastery with all these small Thai monks. I looked out of place, an anachronism, a foreigner in terms of appearance. On the emotional level, however, I always felt at home, and began to recognize that the one thing many of us like about the Asians is that they have this sense of everything belonging — lepers, mad people, the beautiful, the ugly, the rich, the poor, the high caste, the low, whoever. The Asians seem to have this total acceptance of it all, that anyone has just as much right to be there as anyone else, that because you are there, you belong.

Metta, then, is this sense of being at home, of allowing, of accepting and being patient with what you don't like and don't want, of allowing what you find irritating, disgusting and revolting, whatever. It is a question of learning not to get lost in reactions, but rather to be patient and accepting, to welcome even the dark side of your experience. That takes patience, doesn't it? For me at least it does, because emotionally I am conditioned to trying to push things away, trying to get rid of them. Patient acceptance is also about welcoming the good side, but in a way that does not demand it. When happiness is present, welcome it, allow it to arise. But also allow it to cease. To be able to do this takes attentiveness, takes this *buddho*, this still point, this

sense of pure presence which includes all that *is* right now.

I was talking to someone this morning about grief. This, of course, is an emotion we all experience. In the West, however, we don't seem to know how to deal with it, often looking on it as an indulgence, a kind of 'making a lot out of nothing'. We can think we are being quite rational by dismissing feelings of grief. I see this in other people and I can also see it in myself. Before I ever practised meditation my tendency was to dismiss grief whenever it came up in my life. I felt it was more noble to say, 'Oh, just get on with life! Don't make a scene.' That seemed more noble than just sitting around crying and weeping and making everybody feel terrible — 'Just get on with life!' That of course is an ideal and might seem noble, but at the same time it isn't respecting what one is feeling; it is merely trying to push one's feelings aside. So, in awareness we are willing to grieve, not in terms of indulging in grief — it isn't a matter of holding onto it, wallowing in it and feeling sorry for ourselves — but of being willing to allow the emotion to become conscious, to respect it because it is a natural emotional experience.

The Buddha pointed to unsatisfactoriness *(dukkha)* as the first Noble Truth, and in that context he referred to old age, sickness, death, grief, sorrow, despair and anguish. Grief, then, is the first Noble Truth. So it is a question of welcoming it because it is a noble truth and not some kind of personal weakness. Put it into that context of understanding. And understanding the first Noble Truth *(dukkha)* is one of the insights. If your reaction to grief is always rejecting and pushing it away, you have no way of understanding it. This loving-kindness, then, is a way of welcoming. Grief is something to welcome rather than to reject or ignore.

From this still point whenever you feel a sense of loss or separation from the loved, it is more like noting — it is 'like this', it feels 'like this'. What does it feel like here in the body itself? Do you feel it in the lower part of the body, or in the heart, maybe? I notice — and this is my own experience — that as I open to people in the present, I actually feel as though the doors that have been closed here in the heart are opening. I used to think I didn't have a heart. People kept talking about 'heartfelt feelings', and I would think, 'I don't think I have any.' I was such an up-in-the-head type of person that I was never really very aware of what I was feeling. So I put forth effort to be aware on the level of the heart. But there was a strong resistance to it. My rational mind would think, 'Sounds pretty soppy to me . . !' I didn't want to identify myself with these heartfelt feelings. The tendency to think that such things sound emotional and weak is a criticism, though, isn't it? But when I contemplate it, I find this sense of the doors opening. And when I am in this still point and with somebody directly I find it very real. With this group here there is a sense of a heart relationship. I can feel a sense of openness in this area of the heart, and it is an intuitive feeling. I don't think you could measure it with scientific instruments, but this is the best I can do to describe the experience. I also notice, when I go into a critical mode of reactivity, that it seems as though the doors close again. Then I am back in the old pattern of not feeling anything.

When you are caught in thinking, you don't really feel very much, because thinking has no sensitivity. That is why people who think all the time are often very insensitive.

They live in a rational world that is quite beautiful in its own way, but there is no feeling in it. Opening to sensitivity is not a matter of trying to tell yourself to be sensitive; it is rather recognizing that the realm you are living in is 'like this'. And this is not an ideal realm; it is not the perfect place; it is not how things *should* be according to the ideals of what is the best, what is fair or just or perfect. In this realm things change. So fairness is not always going to be what you experience. The atrocities, the serial killers, the wars, the unfairness and the tyrannies, as well as the justice, fairness and goodness — they all belong in this realm. And no matter how much you try to make life into a Garden of Eden, you embrace along with it the forces of your own destruction and the destruction of the garden itself — because that is the way it is. It is not that there is anything wrong.

What are we supposed to learn from this? Ask yourself. I mean, this is obviously something to learn from, isn't it? If it is my fault, then maybe I should do something about it — go to a shaman to exorcize the snakes in my mind, maybe. The idea that it is my fault is one way of looking at it. But it isn't. The Buddha pointed to the dhamma which includes everything; it is all-inclusive. I find that just by contemplating life in this way I am suddenly more interested in it. It no longer seems like an endless struggle with everything. When operating on a personal level — from how things *should* be — it seems that life is always a struggle, and I can never win the battle. As much as I try to control things, try to make them good and make myself what I think I should be, there is always this other side that has to be rejected and denied. It inevitably keeps pounding in my consciousness, demanding attention, taking it all very personally, and then the sense of uselessness and hopelessness, and even, 'Maybe I shouldn't be here! Maybe I don't belong here!'

In terms of taking refuge in the dhamma, then, there is this sense of awakening, the *buddho*, noticing the way it is. The Thais have an acceptance of life that Americans don't have. Luang Por Chah was never idealistic in terms of monks being perfect, being always kind and unselfish. In fact, he would find our weaknesses and mistakes and the way we took ourselves seriously, very amusing. Then he would get us to look at the absurdity of our expectations, the absurdity of trying to make ourselves into something we could never be. This, I think, was one of Luang Por Chah's greatest gifts.

Awareness, then, is just noticing the way it is — the way your body is for one thing, and the way your mental state is — so it is embracing, welcoming, noticing, but not critically. So being aware is being alert, awake, and intelligent; it is an alive sense of being, yet it is not passive or a negative acceptance of life through any kind of resignation to fate. You might have denied and rejected things in the past, but in awareness you include and open to them. Awareness includes even feeling that 'it shouldn't be like this' — it also includes that! There is nothing you can think or say or do that doesn't belong at this moment. No matter how complicated your thought process might be, it belongs; no matter what state your body is in or your emotional state — whether you feel successful and happy or depressed and a failure — it all belongs.

Then there is a sense of, 'Oh, what a relief! I don't have to endlessly try to purify

myself or try to make myself better. I can actually rest a bit — maybe relax and trust — what a relief!' But then we think, 'What will I do if I don't have to do anything?' If we grasp this idea of 'not having to do anything', that also becomes absurd. So 'not having to do anything' is a reflective statement rather than an ideal you hold to. If you attach to 'Now I don't have to do anything', that becomes an ideal again.

The point is to try to use language for reflection rather than for taking a position on anything. This sense of 'I've got to get something I don't have.' What is that? Be the observer of it. 'I'm not good enough the way I am; I've got to make myself better; I've got to do something to improve myself.' What is that like when you observe it as a mental state? To me it is an incredible pushiness all the time, a sense of always being goaded on. And as long as I don't recognize it and don't see it in terms of dhamma, it affects everything I do; it is a kind of underlying influence of how I experience life. This constant sense that I have to get something I don't have, that I'm incomplete, imperfect, not good enough, and that I've got to become enlightened, is *bhavatanha* in the second Noble Truth. This is the desire to become, so it is the cause of suffering.

When we grasp this desire to become *(bhavatanha)*, we experience unsatisfactoriness *(dukkha)*. *Vibhavatanha* is where you have the feeling that you have to get rid of something. You have to get rid of greed because you are too greedy, and you have to get rid of anger because good people are not angry, and you have to get rid of jealousy because it is disgusting to be jealous, and you have to conquer your fears because a brave person is fearless, you have to get rid of . . . whatever. It is all *vibhavatanha* — 'I'm not good enough the way I am. I'm greedy. I get angry. I get jealous and frightened. And I've got to get rid of these emotions.' Just notice this attachment to what seems very good.

In a logical sense we should purify the mind; we should free ourselves from these passions. These are imperatives in the holy life — having to purify and free ourselves from the lower realms, the passions, the selfishness. It isn't that that is wrong, but just notice the attachment to the idea that 'I've got to get rid of this; it's my problem and I'll never be enlightened as long as I have this anger'. This is what the Buddha was constantly pointing to, this attachment *(upadana)*, which is coming from the sense of 'I am this person; I am this body; these are my problems and they are blocking me from enlightenment; I've got to get rid of them'. The whole thing is based on the delusion of 'I am this person'.

So *buddho* transcends the personal, the personality belief *(sakkayaditthi)*; it embraces everything and therefore embraces your personality rather than judges it. This is when we talk about 'the absolute subject' rather than 'the personal subject'. When we attach to a personality, we *become* a personality and interpret experience through the distortions of our personal habits. And as long as that illusion is not seen through, not realized and accepted, we are always going to be frightened. If we are the human body and if we are the person, we can be physically harmed and emotionally humiliated. We all experience these things in many ways. Bodies are vulnerable states, and emotionally we can be damaged just by what somebody might say to us or how they look at us. On a personal level, therefore, being harmed in some way is an ever-present possibility. This is taking things personally and makes the situation that we are living

in rather fraught.

Learning to see this in terms of dhamma, then, in terms of this *buddho* or this still point, gives us the perspective on the way things are. This is developing wisdom rather than just reinforcing personal views of everything, because wisdom is a universal; it is not personal; it is not 'I am wise'. We cannot claim wisdom as some kind of personal attribute, but it certainly operates when we let go of identifying with the personality and the body. If we do claim it on a personal level, if we do start interpreting it in terms of 'I am an attained person, I am an arahant' or anything like that, then we call it 'spiritual defilement', the impurities that come through insight practices. That is why there are very strict rules about this in the bhikkhu-discipline.

There are four disrobing rules, and one of them is if a bhikkhu claims high states that are not true just to delude or exploit others. Even if I have no bad intention and start saying that I am an arahant as a result of a particular experience, that is also an offence I have to confess. I have had experiences through heavy concentration where I *have* felt I was enlightened, 'Oh, I'm enlightened now!' But really it is better not to say anything. Ajahn Chah would say, 'Well, just keep quiet and practise a little more, and then it'll go away.'

Even in Thailand there are people constantly looking for arahants — 'Who is an arahant? Who is a stream-enterer?' There is a strong desire to achieve and attain, and to know what other people's attainments are. So, as soon as they hear that somebody is enlightened, they run off to them. One monk I remember years ago claimed he was enlightened (this was one of Ajahn Chah's disciples) and a whole lot of monks suddenly left Ajahn Chah for him. Ajahn Chah wasn't claiming anything, so they left him because they wanted to be with an enlightened master — but they were disappointed!

The point is, most of us prefer to put our trust in those who say they are enlightened. You get these people who are very confident, these gurus that appear and say, 'I am the Messiah!' or 'I am the Maitreya Buddha of this era!' and people flock to them. Some of these 'gurus' are so confident, in fact, that their confidence has a kind of sparkle to it. When you are really positive, you have a kind of radiant quality about you. The cults that you hear about seem to have the craziest teachings, and the leaders are the most obvious con artists, some of them totally convinced of their own enlightenment. And that kind of confidence is very powerful. So, when we don't trust ourselves, we easily give ourselves over to people we think know what they are doing.

The essence of the Buddha's teaching, however, is awakenedness. The Buddha was saying 'wake up!' not 'I am the Buddha and you must believe in me.' His teaching is an invitation and an encouragement to awaken. That means *you* wake up rather than depending on *me* waking up. This, to me, is very meaningful. In the beginning I felt a lack of something. I didn't feel good enough. I felt I was a defiled person, a weak person and couldn't trust myself, and I wanted to find somebody I could trust. This of course in the end led me to Ajahn Chah. But his emphasis was always on waking *me* up rather than encouraging me to bind myself to *him*. He could see what I was doing and kept pointing it out. I would ask him, 'You know, Ajahn Chah, I've been practising for many years, am I a stream-enterer now?' And he would say, 'How do

you expect me to know?' He would throw me back on myself. 'If *you* don't know, why do you think *I* would know?' And whenever I tried to lean on him in that way, he would — in a gentle way, I never felt he was pushing me away — try to awaken me to what I was doing, to my longing to depend on other people because I thought they were wise and I was not. Actually, he was very effective in getting me to see what I was doing.

I also had this fear of taking responsibility for being wise. My personality would say, 'Don't think *you* will ever be wise!' My personality has this tyrant, so it says, 'You can't trust yourself. You're a mess! Do you think *you* are ever going to be wise?' and it would go on like that. Then I began to see that this inner tyrant was a habit. It wasn't alive; it was a dead thing and would say the same thing no matter what. No matter how good I was, I could never be good enough. No matter how strict I was with the Vinaya, I could never be strict enough. People would say, 'Oh, Ajahn Sumedho, that was a really good talk you gave,' and the inner tyrant would go, 'No it wasn't!' So, no matter how much the world came forth and said, 'You're *really* good, you're *really* wise, you're *really* the best,' the inner tyrant would say, 'You're not!'

By recognizing that this inner tyrant was a habit, I realized that though it seemed alive, it wasn't; it was just something reactive. I then began to see it as something not to believe, something that didn't have any wisdom, something that was dead; it was nothing; it was just that when this button was pushed it went: 'You're not good enough!' and when it was pushed again: 'You're not good enough!' pushed again: 'You're not good enough!' And that is all it could say. So don't believe that kind of thing! Don't give it any ground in your consciousness.

'I am not good enough the way I am and need to practise in order to become enlightened' is a sense of 'I', 'me as a person who has got to do something now in order to become something in the future'. And by contemplating such things, one realizes it is all based on delusion. For one thing, eternity is *now*. When you contemplate the present moment, the future is the unknown, isn't it? What is tomorrow right now? It is what you don't know. You can speculate, guess, and so forth, but this is all taking place now. The past is what you remember, so you remember yesterday or ten years ago, but that is a memory arising in the present. And 'I am this person' is an assumption, isn't it? When you observe your personality, it changes according to conditions. So, your personality changes according to the conditions you are in. Whether you are with friends or enemies, with your parents or with your husband or wife, with your colleagues, alone, in the monastery, or at the Summer School, your personality changes accordingly — because that is the way it is; it adapts itself to the particular conditions present. Yet one has this assumption that 'I am this person all the time'. What we are actually doing, of course, is creating assumptions and never questioning them, never looking into what we are doing.

Awakened awareness allows us to see this. When we rest in this *buddho* or this pure state of being, this listening, this attention, we begin to see how changeable and ephemeral the personality is, and how it depends on conditions for it to be happy or sad, ebullient, depressed, bored, or fulfilled, or for it to feel accepted or rejected. But awareness transcends these personality conditions; it is a constant factor — as distinct

from the personality which is ephemeral — and we begin to see that we cannot trust our personality as our identity because it is not what we are, even though it says so and seems so. We therefore break out of its limitations through awareness — not by rejecting the personality, not by trying to *not* have a personality (which would be impossible anyway) — but by ceasing to be committed to the personality as 'myself'.

We limit ourselves all the time by committing ourselves to the personality; we bind ourselves, often, to very unpleasant limitations that we habitually get caught in. Once we see that, we can free ourselves, we can let go. Our real identity then is in the awareness and in this attitude of welcoming, of *metta*. By trusting awareness, we can learn from it, and find that we can accept and welcome even the most horrible things, the things we are most frightened of. Once we trust in this practice, we find that we have space even for what we most dread. Then that fear and dread drops away . . .