

Affirming Faith in Mind (13) Loving Kindness

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These recent talks have been on miscellaneous subjects relating to our practice. Now I want to talk about self-love, self-esteem, and love of others. In our guided meditation we will practice loving kindness practice, which is very much part of Buddhism. It is not often emphasised in much, but it is there and some teachers do emphasise it. Yet others may not. Typically in our Zen practice, particularly in Japan, you may never hear about it. In Mahayana Buddhism it is not practiced as in Theravada Buddhism. Subhana Barzarhi, one of our teachers in Sydney Zen Centre, regularly teaches *Metta*, or loving kindness practice.

At the moment she is offering a seven week course in Professional and Personal Development Training – Love, Intimacy & the Buddha. Therapists who undertake this course receive accreditation points. It is a huge topic and we all have it as an important part of our lives.

In everyday practice this is expressed through awareness and attention, equating with the practice of loving kindness. It can be seen in therapy as one person giving their full attention to the other, and that translates as a loving kindness practice.

It comes in the family by giving awareness to the children, that equates to loving kindness in the family. In our tradition it equates more with that aspect than the more emotional things we generally associate with loving kindness. It is usually associated with a lot of emotions. This has been a little suspect in our tradition, a little too superficial. It's not oppressed but it seems to be superficial.

In our Zen tradition generally it is implied, as the New Age movement has developed, that you start giving love to yourself first before you can give it to someone else. In our loving kindness practice we always start by giving love to ourselves first because it is seen that you can't give anything out to anyone else until you start with yourself first.

Traditionally in other practices, like Christianity, it has been seen as something selfish. It is misunderstood of course, but it has been seen as a selfish thing to do because you should all the time be focused on others. They use the example of Jesus putting others first. But this is a very idealistic approach. No one has actually seen Jesus, no one knew him. It's an ideal that got created and now is seen as an ideal way that has always seemed to be.

In reality, Buddhism, which hasn't focused so much on that, may be closer to the reality of what Jesus was really talking about –that you need to love yourself first. We see in our society, our relationships, our friendships, that a lot of people don't love themselves at all. Not enough anyway. In a whole set of ways we see that. We see people who are continually abusing themselves, smoking,

abusing the body, lack of health, wrong diet, etc. They know it's not the right thing to do but they continue doing it. You might say to a friend or family member that what they are doing is not healthy, and they might reply that they know. Well why do they keep doing that to themselves?

We see this to a huge degree right around the world, not only in the Western society. People are abusing themselves in various ways. Also, settling for less, not seeking the best for themselves in life, whether it is in health, education, in what they love doing. They might have a passion to do art, but they feel they don't deserve to do that, and must stay in the office. When asked what they love doing, they might say, "I love to do art". Well why don't they? For whatever reason, whatever excuse – there is no confidence, no self-love, no self-esteem there.

That becomes very difficult. In our teaching it says that if you can't be successful in the relative world then it is very hard to be successful in our practice in the absolute world as well.

You don't get any points for not being successful. No one gives you any points in the relative world for not being successful. If I go out on the river and I am unsuccessful in rowing the boat, I don't get any points for that. It becomes a survival issue. If I'm driving my car in a hazardous way, in a sloppy way, I don't get any points for that. I get into hospital for that!

Life rewards success generally. It rewards skillful behaviour.

What is it that holds us back? Whether in the relative world or in this practice, or in anything we undertake? What lack of self-belief, lack of self-esteem, lack of self-love holds us back? This attitude will run right through everything we do.

Therapy and New Age teachings have come to the conclusion that a lot of reasons for people's behaviour and ill health were from a lack of self-worth, they didn't feel they were worth much, worthy to be happy, healthy. So they keep settling for less than they know.

Krishnamurti often said to the students, don't settle for less. Don't be mediocre, don't go half way. Like the myth of Sisyphus, pushing the rock half way up the hill, which then fell back down. He never actually gets to the top so the rock can freely fall down the other side. He is always mediocre, going half way, never fully loving. People think they are unworthy to be successful, that it is selfish to be successful. Somehow it has been made into a spiritual teaching. Jesus said to be humble, which has been turned into a spiritual teaching.

When you feel like that, you have almost robbed yourself of your self-power. There is a word for that – *yoriki*. This means self-power. This is that thing that enlivens you, gives you strength. If you are all the time giving the message to yourself that you are not worthy, you are weak, you want to be like Jesus, or our image of what we are conditioned to think Jesus was like which was conditioned from centuries of understanding, we lose that self-power. We lose the self-love, which means we can't do anything. We become terribly mediocre.

We are in a job and we know we should be doing something we are passionate about, yet we can't change. We know we need to say something to a family member, but we can't because we think it would be sinful to tell them

what we are really feeling. So all the time there is a sense we are being held back. The life force is being wasted in that situation.

In England there has been a strong movement that people have to educate themselves about their own health. So when they go to the doctor they are assertive, get a second opinion, they make their own assessment of it. There is a big push to be self-educated medically so that they are not a victim of certain doctors who says, "Do this" then you are condemned to that thing.

This attitude follows right through our lives, right through anything we do. What is it that continues that attitude in us? What is the thought, the feeling that says to settle for less? Why don't you love yourself enough to ask for the best for yourself? What is it that holds you from asking for the highest quality?

In Buddhist terms we are given this incredibly precious human birth then we squander it. We put the top petrol in the Mercedes car then we put the worst food and drink into our human bodies. Isn't that extraordinary? We give the car the very best so there is no problem with the motor, paying the extra dollars to give the best attention to your car, then you come inside and have the worst sugared and fatted takeaway food under the sun. This machine, our body, goes under. The car however, goes for years beautifully!

What is behind that attitude? What drives that conditioning? We need to ask ourselves this question otherwise it continues, and gets passed down to our children –that second best is good enough, we don't deserve the best. That attitude permeates through, and we treat other people the same, then we treat the planet the same way. We trash the planet, everything we touch, because we don't deserve it, it doesn't deserve it either.

I don't normally talk like this. I normally talk on a Zen theme.

Robert Aitken Roshi used to notice that some people would come to him with a lack of self-worth. He would advise that therapy might help promote it. He noticed that those who went to therapy had better self-esteem. The point here is that whatever works, whatever gets us over the line is important.

The first step as in anything is to recognize it. If we see something happening then we can adjust it. If we can't see it, it is happening automatically or unconsciously, and it is very hard to adjust it.

What holds us back through our practice? It is not just sitting meditation, it is a whole way of life. As Vimila Thakar used to say, meditation is a full complete way of life. There are no compartments for meditation over there, and non-meditation over here. It becomes a way of life, everything you do, what you are eating, how much exercise you are getting, how much sleep you need. It is a continual watching of the whole process. In the end everything comes together in a certain order. Order is not imposed on your life, as Krishnamurti says. Order comes out of watching disorder. When you watch disorder and are aware of all the disorder, order starts to come naturally, through the watching. Through the awareness if disorder comes order. So you don't impose some artificial order on your life. If you start to see some disorder in your life, as soon as you become aware of it, it starts to change.

Our practice has a yogic quality to it, noting everything we do. Everlasting watchfulness is like driving, if you take your eye off the road your car is up the tree before you know it. You are taking the position of being the observer, as we do in our relaxation session.

In Zen this is not usually emphasized but our teacher Joko Beck said it is still very necessary to have that watching in the background. In our teaching it is in the background because you are more fully in this moment but in some way there in the background there is a watching going on noting. So I often recommend people to have a journal and do diary work because that is a way of watching what is happening through the whole day. If we have decisions to make, journal writing becomes very good practice.

It is easy in our decision making to settle for second best. Just hold up. Lets just solve this koan, this problem properly. Our koan is often our daily life koan. For example, if I get a feeling about that dentist for my children that doesn't feel right, am I going to go ahead and book him? No, stop! If in doubt, leave it out. Let's see if we can get someone a bit better for them. Whatever the situation is.

If there is a doubt there, listen to that doubt. Don't suppress the doubt, as if it is a troublesome doubt that needs to go away. Listen to the doubt. Ask why it is there. What is it saying to us? It is saying this isn't good enough. Don't just ride over the top of that doubt. Listening is the same as watching, that everlasting watching.

What I have been saying here is not strictly our normal practice, but to me it informs and underscores our practice.