

Inter-connectedness

Last week I ended our time together saying we would focus on the fourth foundation of mindfulness – using mindfulness to penetrate the nature of reality which brings us to the wisdom of the dhammas – and apply them more personally to relationships. And I said that Sylvia Boorstein has suggested that wise relationships are the ninth step of the 8-fold path. Certainly as Buddhism comes to the West, from an Asian monastic male oriented celibate culture to Western psychologically and feminist informed paradigms of relating, especially through a very relationally oriented meditation center like Spirit Rock where many of the founding teachers, even if they were once ordained monks in Thailand, are now licensed psychotherapists, it behooves us to explore how we can best apply the capacities of mindfulness to penetrate to the true nature of reality to relationships.

I once had an interview on retreat with Sylvia and she was commenting on the new relationship I was in at the time, saying, “Dharma is good, but love is the best.” As I pondered this, my own exploration of love in a Buddhist paradigm led to yes, there are two wings of the dharma – wisdom and compassion or selfless love.

Last week Harold sent me the link to access to insight and Bikku Bodhi’s teachings on the noble 8-fold path, including right mindfulness. What I loved about his teachings, besides the incredible clarity and ease of his writing, was his idea that mindfulness makes the wisdom and compassion – any of the objects of the fourth foundation – directly visible. Mindfulness – the focused attention, the bare awareness that allows us to see things clearly as they are, penetrates through the constructs and obscurations of our mind to see the dhammas, the ultimate truth of things. That ultimate truth of things is accessed by the direct and clear knowing of our own experience, not on faith, or the authority of books or teachers, or deduced or inferred, it is grokked, it is a direct felt sense, a direct inner knowing.

If we patiently, but diligently, penetrate experience on the wisdom side we will come to our own experience of the impermanence of all things in existence, that there is no solid self. If we patiently, but diligently, penetrate experience on the compassion side of things (there are not two sides really, but there is the expression two wings of the dharma - wisdom and compassion, awareness and acceptance, which hints of mind and heart, consciousness and love) – then we come to our own experience of the underlying inter-connectedness of all of existence.

Wisdom tells me I am nothing; love tells me I am everything. Between the two my life flows.

- Sri Nisargadatta

That makes every single thing we do or feel or think of significance.

“We are all connected to everyone and everything in the universe. Therefore, everything one does as an individual affects the whole. All thoughts, words, images, prayers, blessings, and deeds are listened to by all that is.”

- Serge Kahili King

Everything arises and passes away, but it arises and passes away in a causal web of inter-being, in Thich Nhat Hanh’s phrase. Through mindfulness we come to the direct knowing of the truth of that inter-connection.

Some thoughts from other wisdom teachers:

“Our stream of thought has been working to create an impression of an isolated “self,” set apart from all others, which appears real, substantial, and thereby seemingly safe. Although we have all believed such thoughts of “self” as something isolated from and over against others, we have never existed in that way. Therefore, we can never become happy or fulfilled by pretending to exist in that way. Rather, we have always existed in much deeper relationship to all others, who in their innate nature of goodness and their self-centered habits of thought are like alternative versions of ourselves. That is the reality of our existence.”

- John Makransky

“Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in the eyes of the Divine. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.”

- Thomas Merton

“A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security.”

- Albert Einstein

Our mindfulness practice can take us from “I” to non-self, and does. It can also take us from “I” to “we”, and does.

In applying mindfulness to the dhamma of inter-connection, we discover for ourselves that connection is never not. There is an illusion of separateness, an illusion of dis-connection that is the greatest grief we can experience as human beings. And we are moved to practice....

One foundation of practice in relationships, as we learned last week, is the Brahma Viharas loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity – the divine or heavenly abodes that are both gateways to enlightenment and the outcome arising naturally out of an expanded enlightened consciousness. The Brahma Viharas are all about relationship, to everything, especially to other people, especially to difficult and challenging people.

In the metta sutta, the Buddha teaches: even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world. Spreading upward to the skies and downward to the depths; outward and unbounded, free from hatred and ill-will. And of course the phrase earlier in the sutta, omitting none.

Practicing metta allows us to experience that all beings are kin. I did get curious and looked up the etymology of kin and kindness. Kin came first, Middle English back to Old English back to Old High German – people of common ancestry. We know now from evolution, we all came from the same lineage of evolution, we are all kin. Kin became the noun kind - a group with common qualities – a particular kind of people – and then the adjective kind – to be affectionate and loving to one's kind or kin, and then kindness, being kind to others.

People commented on the exercise we did last week, where we related to each other through the Brahma Viharas, and asked if we could just begin the dharma talk with that this week. How powerful – and rare - it is to deeply connect for just a few moments, to feel kinship or kindred spirit with someone we may not even know – heart to heart or, in the vocabulary of other traditions, soul to soul.

Another dhamma to practice in our tradition is the paramitas, the ten perfections that again, as we practice them, are gateways to enlightenment and are the outcome naturally arising out of an expanded enlightened consciousness. Generosity, morality – the bliss of blamelessness, renunciation or letting go, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving kindness, equanimity. Again, all relational, all practices to act clearly from seeing clearly, especially in relationship to other people, especially difficult or challenging people. Practicing the paramitas helps us expand our sense of kin outward, upward, downward, unbounded, free from hatred and ill will, omitting none.

I want to explore tonight how to use mindfulness of the Brahma Viharas and the paramitas to expand our sense of kinship with all beings and make this inter-connection, in the vocabulary of other traditions, this communion among the sacred and all beings, more visible, more central to our minds and hearts, so that we increasingly relate to all beings through a recognition of our essential and common true nature, evoking a sense of conscious compassionate connection in all of our relationships.

I'll share with you three stories of mindful awareness leading to a direct felt experience of inter-connection and then ask you to remember moments of your own.

The first is a moment of my own aha! of a direct felt sense of inter-connection. I was at a lecture, part of the Zen' Center's series on Buddhism at the Millenium's Edge. The speaker was the poet David Whyte; it was at the First Unitarian Church in San Francisco, so it was packed with almost 1,000 people.

I noticed sitting next to each other a client of mine and an intern of mine. Both of them had a close relationship with me, but there was no way either one would know about the relationship of the other to me. They were having a grand time talking away and I realized, every single person in the hall could have – one degree of separation – a personal connection with everybody else in the hall and not know it. We could have a personal connection with everyone else here in this sitting group, and not know it. And, of course, the degrees of separation with anyone else on the planet is now down from 7 to about three. We are all connected; it's just not always visible at first.

The second story about recognizing kinship in another comes from the book *Living Deeply: The Art and Science of Transformation in Everyday Life*, which is a gem of a book; I wrote about it in this month's e-newsletter which posted Monday morning. 10 years of research at the Institute of Noetic Sciences on the transformation of consciousness, including interviews with folks we know like Sylvia Boorstein, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Adyashanti, Ram Dass, Noah Levine, Rachael Naomi Remen, Angeles Arrien, Stan Grof, Sharon Salzber, Pa Auk Sayadaw, Huston Smith, Frances Vaughan, Br. David Stendl-Rast, Alan Wallace. Good stuff. This is the story of Zenkei Blanche Hartman, former abbess of the San Francisco Zen Center.

“During the Vietnam War, I was a political activist. I fought for peace. There was some contradiction. There wasn't any peace in me. I hated the people who disagreed with me. That was a kind of war within myself. In 1968, I was just beginning to look at the way in which I was vigorously clinging to my opinions about things and denigrating others who had different opinions, when there was a strike at San Francisco State University.

“The police came with their masks and clubs, started poking people. And without thinking, I ducked under the hands of people to get between the police and students. I met this riot squad policemen face-to-face with his mask on and everything. He was close enough to touch. I met this policeman's eyes straight on, and I had this overwhelming experience of identification, of shared identity.

“This was the most transformative moment of my life – having this experience of shared identity with the riot squad policeman. It was a gift. Nothing had prepared me for it. I didn't have any conceptual basis for understanding it. The total experience was real and incontrovertible.

“My life as a political activist ended with that encounter, because there was no longer anything to fight against. The way I described it to my friends was the policeman was trying to protect what he thought was right and good from all of the other people who were trying to destroy it – and I was doing the same thing.

“Since I had no basis for understanding the experience of shared identity with someone whom I had considered complete “other” (i.e., the riot squad policeman), and because the experience had been so real and so powerful, I began to search for someone who would understand it. How could a riot squad policemen and I be identical? In my search I met Suzuki Roshi. The way he looked at me, I knew he understood. That’s how I got here. [as an ordained Zen Buddhist monk.]”

And this wonderful poem story written by Naomi Shihab Nye, the Palestinian-American poet. You may know her as the author of the poem Kindness.

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“Wandering Around an Albuquerque Airport Terminal”

By Naomi Shihab Nye

After learning my flight was detained 4 hours, I heard the announcement: If anyone in the vicinity of gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.

Well — one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there. An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. Help, said the flight service person. Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be four hours late and she did this.

I put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly. Shu dow-a, shu-biduck habibti, stani stani schway, min fadlick, sho bit se-wee? The minute she heard any words she knew — however poorly used — she stopped crying. She thought our flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for some major medical treatment the following day. I said, No, no, we’re fine, you’ll get there, just late, who is picking you up? Let’s call him and tell him.

We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out, of course, they had ten shared friends. Then I thought, just for the heck of it, why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her. This all took up about 2 hours. She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life. Answering questions.

She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies — little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts — out of her bag — and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the traveler from California, the lovely woman

from Laredo — we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There are no better cookies.

And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers — non-alcoholic — and the two little girls for our flight, one African-American, one Mexican-American — ran around serving us all apple juice and lemonade and they were covered with powdered sugar, too.

And I noticed my new best friend — by now we were holding hands — had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate — once the crying of confusion stopped — has seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too. This can still happen, anywhere.

Not everything is lost.

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It can still be like that. We resonate deeply with other people's sorrows and joys and generosity because we are evolutionarily hardwired to. From the Dalai Lama:

“Consider the following. We humans are social beings. We come into the world as the result of others' actions. We survive here in dependence on others. Whether we like it or not, there is hardly a moment of our lives when we do not benefit from others' activities. For this reason it is hardly surprising that most of our happiness arises in the context of our relationships with others.”

And, of course, much of our anguish arises in the context of our relationships with others, too. That's why we deepen our practice.

Exercise: Take a moment to turn to your partner and remember a moment when an experience of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity, or generosity, patience, telling the truth, determination made the human kinship, the inter-connection of life visible to you. You knew directly in your heart and bones. Then perhaps share also the awareness of the joy, the compassion, the kindness, the love that arose in your heart in that moment. As you face your partner, take a moment to go inside and recollect — another term for mindfulness — your experience. I'll ring the bell to begin sharing.

De-brief.

We can use our mindfulness to make the inter-connections of all existence more visible, more central to our own existence, cultivating awareness of relating to people with consciousness and compassion (two wings of the dharma)

Exercise:

Namaste is the traditional greeting in the Hindu tradition. This version I've heard ascribed to Gandhi, who knows? It is his tradition.

I honor the place within you where
The entire universe resides.

I honor the place within you of love and light,
Of peace and truth.

I honor the place within you where,
when you are in that place in you
and I am in that place in me,
there is only one of us.

- Mohandis Gandhi

As I say this version of Namaste three times, turn to one person, then another, then another, saying these words silently in your heart as I say them for all of us.

Sit for one minute. May our mindfulness penetrate the confusion and fears we sometimes experience in relationships. May we see clearly the kinship, the conscious compassionate connection, the love between us and all beings. May the sincerity of our practice be of benefit to ourselves, to each other, and to all beings.

Namaste