
Multi-tasking

Question: The practice of Buddhism encourages present moment awareness, can this awareness co-exist with multi-tasking?

Randula: The question is what is multi-tasking? Doing multiple tasks at the same time? Is that real? Or is it a concept in your mind? Have you segregated your motion in space in to separate tasks? Are you holding on to the previous task in your mind whilst you are doing the current task? Can you not let go of the previous task and do the present task?

Can you let go of the desire to remember to know when the kettle stops boiling whilst you are chopping vegetables?

If the mind is holding on to something else, your awareness in the present moment is limited.

You might chop your fingers instead of the vegetables.

Can you be aware of the whole experience rather than focusing on your task?

Can you be aware of the kettle boiling whilst being aware of chopping vegetables?

Not holding on to either or its result.

Investigating feelings

Question: The main reason for my desire to not be present and to want to run away from here-and-now seems to be a deep inner pain and rawness, which is in the lower chest and a tightness around the stomach. I guess it's a deep-seated anxiety, and it sometimes feels like a deep sorrow too. I don't know where it originates specifically or what it relates to, but it sometimes comes up during and after meditation.

I spent this morning watching this writhing inner restlessness and pain; it gradually became relatively still, but the vulnerable rawness remained.

Does this sound familiar to others and can you offer tips on how to manage this and respond to it wisely?

Randula: You describe being aware of your experience and how you noticed it changing. You don't need to give it a particular name. You don't need to know a place or time in convention it relates to. Just get to know the experience. This is what this feeling is like. This is what unpleasant feeling is like. This is how it changes. Notice how the feeling ends when you were just observing. Notice how there was suffering before? And then you observed there was less suffering? Question why was this? Why was there less suffering later? Who was then causing the suffering? Notice how another feeling has arisen. Keep watching that feeling, continue with your investigation. Let the experience reveal itself through your questioning and observing rather than trying to fit the experience in to a conventional box - not even a conventional spiritual box.

What is Right Action in the face of injustice?

Question(s):

- 1. Other spiritual groups in the UK, and Buddhist groups, including Theravada groups, in the USA, have spoken out against racism and injustice following the murder of George Floyd. So far there have been no dhamma reflections related to this on the Amaravati website. Apart from practicing loving kindness and compassion, and being mindful of our own dealings and attitude towards the issue of race and equality what actions should Buddhists take to support justice and human rights?*
- 2. Please could you give some guidance on Right Action in these uncertain times? Once we have sat with anger, is it right to speak out against environmental destruction and stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter.....or just accept injustice and "go with the flow"? Is non-violent direct action against injustice justified?*
- 3. just coming out of the talk just now, my daughter (23) wants to know "isn't anger important for social change?"*

Randula: All these three questions relate to a recent incident in America where a Police officer had murdered a black man. It doesn't matter who or what circumstance - murder - taking the life of another living being is not right. That is not right action.

The question is how do we respond. Just sit with the experience you've heard or watched and as you do then notice the feelings that arise. Feeling of anger, frustration, compassion, pity, sorrow, helplessness, guilt, 'I shouldn't be feeling like this, I am a Buddhist', confusion. Whatever the feeling is. Just sit with it. Be patient with it. Observe it. Investigate where is this coming from? Let it pass away. When the mind is clear you will see clearly. When the mind is full of anger, frustration - it is like muddy water. You need to let the mud settle. No one likes being sprayed with muddy water. Have you walked in the rain and been splashed by a car driving through a

muddy puddle. That is not nice is it? But I would enjoy standing under a waterfall or being splashed with spring water - I wouldn't complain, I would quite enjoy that. So don't splash the world with your muddy water. Sprinkle it with spring water, the world will welcome that.

So when your mind is clear, out of compassion you will know the right thing to do. You will know when to stay silent, when to speak up, when to go march.

You don't need to be angry to make change happen. The Buddha. Jesus Christ, Nelson Mandela - they are great role models for humanity that acted and changed society out of compassion without anger and they are still remembered for this. These are the people we need to emulate.

It doesn't mean we cannot raise our voice. We don't have to be angry inside to raise our voice. We can have loving kindness and compassion in our hearts and yet speak up. So, as an example, I was working in a psychiatry ward once when a man was admitted. He seemed to be slightly intoxicated but he needed to be assessed. I couldn't get through to him using gentle speech. So out of compassion I had to change the tone of my voice. I had to be like a police officer using short phrases. 'Hello Sir! What's your name? What are you doing here?' Outwardly it looked like I was angry, everyone must have wondered what happened to Randula, but he understood and we connected.

There are many stories of Ajahn Chah raising his voice to discipline monks but inwardly he was calm, he had compassion. Like you would discipline your children out of compassion. If you do it out of compassion, you can quickly move on but if you do it out of anger, you will have to spend the next few hours or days trying to shake it off.

It doesn't mean we also have to raise our voices to be heard. So once I was working on a medical ward on a night shift. A prisoner was brought in for treatment of his physical health. He was getting very restless and angry, not wanting to stay on the ward. They already had four prison officers on the ward. They were calling for two more back up officers when the hospital manager told me that he thinks I would need to section him to keep him overnight to treat his health problems. The manager had found the necessary paper work that I needed to fill out. So I went to see him. There were the prison officers around him. He was a middle aged man sitting on his hospital bed with his hands folded on his table. He was towering over me, though he was sat. So I remained standing. I went up to him and listened. He told me he wanted to go back to his prison. He didn't want to stay in hospital. He was like a child wanting to be at home not wanting to be in hospital, having blood tests and injections. Home to him was his cell. He wanted to go back to the safety of his cell. This didn't make sense to the outside world but that is how he felt. I didn't have to say much. Just listen. Once his pain was heard, acknowledged and understood - he was happy to stay. The manager and the prison officers were questioning what was the secret? Was it some special touch? Was it some miraculous power? That this restless, angry man agreed to stay even when six prison officers couldn't control him? - they doubt the power of acceptance and compassion.

So how do you know when to listen, when to speak softly, when to speak up? You just stay in the present moment. In that nonjudgmental acceptance of the situation and the person. Then the heart will know. You follow the heart.

So the practice is not about being passive or not acting but it is having Right Action and Right Action is not out of anger. It is not out of greed. It is not out of judgement. Right Action arises through acceptance. It arises from loving kindness and compassion. It arises from a clear mind with wisdom - sprinkling spring water to the world.

Thoughts

Question: Trying to do my own thinking, I understand that the mind "goes elsewhere" because it is deluded. We crave and attach ourselves to things for example.

Can you say a bit more about the balance between the need to `go elsewhere` to negotiate conventional reality [for example I need to recall the route to get home otherwise I will be left wandering the streets!]; active `intellectual thinking` to work things out and to understand; daydreaming and reverie; and the aim to remain in the present moment here and now? I guess this is dependent on circumstances.

Randula: This is because we attach to thinking. We think of it as something we need to hold on to. Thoughts, like any other phenomena, arise and cease. We feel if we don't hold on to thoughts we will forget. It's like I was at a workshop once - sitting next to this middle-aged gentleman. It was a workshop packed with information updating you on all the new developments of the last year. By the end of the three hours the gentleman next to me was tired. He said 'Oh. I cannot take any more information. I have no space in my head. I am getting a headache'. I wondered, how interesting - this poor man, holding on to these thoughts. It's like trying to hold on to air. You keep trying to catch air and make your fist tighter and tighter thinking you are really holding on to air but all you are doing is digging your nails into your palm and causing pain in your knuckles. So this man has just created himself stress and given himself a headache by trying to hold on to thoughts. You can be aware of the thought - you can watch thoughts change and evolve. You can observe the memory of the way home arising in your mind.

This mind will give rise to thoughts and you direct these skilfully in the way of Dhamma. Give it a framework of cause and effect (dependant origination) or impermanence or non self or *Dukkha* and let thoughts form around that rather than trying to form thoughts in the ways of the world, creating more stories.

Irritation with family

Question: During this time I have been feeling generally good and have been using the time to deepen my practice but in recent weeks I have been getting increasingly irritated and annoyed with friends and family I am close to. I am finding these emotions difficult to handle. I wonder if other people are having similar experiences and how would the Buddha handle such emotions?

Randula: What is the real problem here. It is neither your family and friends nor your irritation. Family and friends are just conditions. Irritation is the reaction. A reaction that arises from misunderstanding, of not wanting things to be the way they are. From struggling to accept unpleasant conditions. So it is just showing us that there is more work to be done. The great thing is that this has been noticed - suffering has been noticed and the possibility of an existence where this is not there has been sought.

So what is it that we do? We be patient with ourselves. We spread loving kindness to ourselves. In our interactions with family and friends we be patient with their shortcomings. We intentionally bring up thoughts of loving kindness to our minds as they speak and act. When we do this, there is no space for anger to arise. We can remain calm and collected. We can then watch any irritation that arises without acting upon it.

Then later we sit with that irritation and anger and we observe it. We let go of all the stories and just sit with that feeling. We watch it. We get to know this feeling. We see it for what it is and what's behind it. We keep doing this over and over and over and over again. Until one day, it all breaks apart and its true cause is seen through. Just as when you are to remove weeds from your garden, you need to first identify a weed as a weed. Then you need to go deeper to get to its roots. Then when you see the roots you can dig it out from the roots. Then the weed will no longer arise. Just so, once anger is identified. We keep watching it following it through to its roots and its only when the roots of anger have been seen through, will it then cease to arise. So until then these interactions with family are great opportunities in which to spot anger and irritation that may otherwise be hidden away.

What is the soul?

We spoke about our mind, heart and body. How the soul fits in as a whole.?

Randula: This is something for you to investigate. The Buddha instructed us to investigate the true nature of our existence to try and come to the answers ourselves? What is a soul? Do you mean a fixed entity that we call ourselves? Where is this found? Can you notice anything that is fixed in your experience? What is your experience? The body. Feelings. Thoughts. Perceptions. Awareness. Are they always the same? Do they change? At which moment and combination of body, feelings, thoughts, perception and awareness is it you? If you hold on to a particular

combination and say 'ah this is me' and then things change, does that cause you pain? Is that because your perception of who you are and the reality are not aligned? Then who are you? The Buddha encouraged us to see, investigate and understand how these phenomena we name as to be ourselves cause us suffering, and how they change and so are not under our control, so couldn't really be who and what we are. And then as this is slowly let go of, we are left with what we really are, which is to be understood for ourselves as it does not follow the conventional concepts of what we call me or mine.
