International Buddhist Meditation Center

Articles from the IBMC Monthly Guide

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Bringing Dharma into Relationships

by Ven. Dr. Karuna Dharma

I would like to share a few things I have learned over the years about bringing Dharma into relationships. Human relations is the area in which our practice is most seriously tested. By looking at our relationships, we can gauge the progress of our practice and see how profoundly it is affecting our lives.

In a room with forty people, there are forty different universes. Each one of us sits at the center of our universe. Because it is a universe that we have created, we believe in it. The problem is that each of us views our individual universe from our own particular little time and space, and our universes do not always coincide, so frictions develop. Each of us sits and looks at the others, honestly not understanding what has created the disharmony. Each of us creates our own fictitious universe which we genuinely believe to be true. This can cause serious problems when we become involved in relationships.

How do we solve these problems? How do we remove the barrier that we have drawn around our little universe so we won't be constantly bumping and grating against someone else's? The best way is to drop all the defenses we've thrown up to protect the person who sits in the middle of that universe. We spend so much time building and shoring up these defenses. That means less time is spent in communicating directly.

Where do the defenses come from? Our defenses are there to protect the fictitious universe we have fabricated and regard as true. I may not buy your fabrication, because I didn't create it, but I buy mine and I know mine is superior to yours. See? This is what really interferes with our human relationships. We very busily try to keep a fiction going that is all of our own creation.

Suppose we are on a train and see, for just one second, something happening outside the window. How accurate is our interpretation of that event? How much can we understand of the image we see? We peek into each other's universes for a brief moment, as if passing on a speeding train, yet we're very quick to interpret what we glimpsed in that moment. We are sure our interpretation is correct. This is very dangerous.

If I can free myself from what I have fabricated, there will be no need to continue building or repairing my defenses. And the fewer defenses I have, the better I can communicate and understand you, because I no longer feel threatened. What you think of me means nothing if I feel secure. I only feel fearful because my view of reality has been threatened. The problem is not that someone has been talking behind my back; the problem is that I found out about it and I don't deserve it.

We can disagree about things, but why should that cause conflict? We may never agree on some things, because we perceive things from different angles, but that doesn't have to result in conflict. Why should we be upset because we disagree? When we don't have anything to protect, there is no longer anything to fear. We can experience everything fully, which is wonderful. We can really enjoy being in other people's company, because we're not busy maintaining our own identity. Why waste the time? Why create the anger and the hurt?

We need to let go, but it is not easy. The closer the relationship, the closer we come to our image of who we are. The closer things strike this concept of self we have fabricated, the more difficult it is. Meditation can be very helpful here. We need just hear the sounds, observe the view, and become one with all of it, without feeling any separation. This can help us change our viewpoint and interpretation of the self. We don't have to protect ourselves from the little bird that just went by; we just hear it.

We can begin knocking down the barriers in everything we do: in groups, at work, with our friends, our boss, our lover. If something disturbs us, we can just observe it, and gradually we become a bit more objective. When someone says something, we don't automatically think: "What does that mean? It's because I'm a woman. It's because of my ethnic background. It's because I belong to a certain religious tradition." Maybe it's because you did something that was insensitive or hurtful. There may be many reasons, but once we let our fabricated self-image drop away, we can begin to understand people.

We can be either content or discontent, happy or unhappy. So why be unhappy? Usually we regard as positive those things which reinforce our concept of who we are, and as negative those things which either don't reinforce that concept or threaten it. These habit patterns are very difficult to break, but once I break them, I am not bothered even if someone launches a full-scale attack on me.

If others are making our life miserable, why let them win? Instead, we can look at ourselves and our idiosyncrasies, accept them, and learn to laugh at them. We learn to love ourselves with all our perceived strengths and all our perceived weaknesses. When I become angry, to feel guilty because I am not a fully enlightened Buddha is the height of egotism. On the phenomenological level, we are not Buddhas yet. When misunderstandings occurred, my teacher used to say, "Well, we're not Buddhas yet!" We need not expect ourselves to be Buddhas nor expect our partners to be Buddhas either.

Situations of hurt need to be depersonalized so that the victim does not become burdened with guilt or shame. Healing cannot occur as long as we internalize events and blame ourselves. In a sense, in not understanding the essence of the mind, the perpetrator is also the victim. Rather than creating a separation between myself as victim and the other as perpetrator, we need to understand that each of us is capable of the most heinous acts. If you don't believe it, you have not explored yourself very well yet. Rather than deny it, we need to confront ourselves very directly. There are also countless ways in which we victimize ourselves.

By contrast, a bodhisattva, one who is truly on the path, has an invincible armor: the armor of love. The love of a bodhisattva is immeasurably great, and we can glimpse it through intensive meditation. Such a being willingly endures lifetimes of suffering to save other beings. The bodhisattva path is wisdom and compassion: a path of choosing wisely, with love.

Wisdom and Compassion by Dat Dhammashila Nguyen

Wisdom or prajna is a central notion of Buddhism, especially in Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. It refers to an immediately experienced intuitive wisdom that cannot be conveyed by concepts or in intellectual terms. The definitive moment of praina is insight into the emptiness or sunyata which is the true nature of reality. The realization of praina is often equated with the attainment of enlightenment and is one of the essential marks of Buddhahood. Prajna is also one of the perfections or paramitas actualized by Bodhisattvas in the course of their development. Wisdom is both the crowning achievement and vehicle of the Theravadins; it leads to Liberation and, at the same time, it is Liberation.

Compassion or karuna is active sympathy and gentle affection. It is the outstanding quality of all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Compassion extends itself without distinction to all sentient beings. It is based on the enlightened experience of the oneness of all beings. Karuna must be accompanied by wisdom in order to have the right effect. The person striving for Nirvana aspires to be compassionate, self-sacrificing, altruistically aiding others by teaching, doing good, transferring merit, and offering prayers in order to build up moral and spiritual perfections.

The virtue of compassion is embodied in the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Karuna is often translated as "pity" or "sympathy." Since these notions tend to suggest passive attitudes that do not contain the quality of active help that is an essential part of karuna, the concept of "compassion" is more suitable. Karuna and prajna are the principle virtues for adherents of the Mahayana, whereas in the Theravada tradition, wisdom is regarded as the most important factor on the path to enlightenment. In the Pure Land schools of China, Japan and Vietnam, the compassionate approach finds expression in the saving grace of Amitabha Buddha.

The Three Jewels

by Ven. Sarika Dharma

When we offer incense, we light three sticks, bow toward the altar and place each stick separately in the incense burner: one for the Buddha, one for the Dharma and one for the Sangha.

We may think of these three jewels in different ways. Here is one view:

The Buddha can be seen as the trailblazer. He explored unknown territory, went further than others had gone and came back with a map showing the way to the end of suffering. That map is the eightfold path.

The Dharma then is the trail, the path to follow, the teachings of the Buddha, the teachings of others who have followed him and attained awakening. This trail also includes the world outside us and within us. When we begin to see clearly, we gain understanding of how this world works.

The Sangha are the pioneers, the practitioners who follow the trail, making their own discoveries with the guidance of the Buddha's map. Whether monks or laity, we all need to do our own explorations; we also help each other on the way.

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Reaction, Reflection and Response

by Rev. Kusala Ratna Karuna

What do these three words have in common? Could these words be the key to personal liberation and freedom? Perhaps, or maybe they are an explanation of a problem facing all of us: how to stay in the present moment.

Reaction is our habitual way of making the world pay attention to us. A non-thinking, conditioned way of dealing with life's challenges. In Buddhism, this reactionary way of dealing with the world is created by sankharas.

Sankhara is a term used in Buddhist psychology to define our mental habit patterns, those patterns formed by past conditioning. Our pro-actions turn into reactions after enough repetition. When this transformation occurs, the mind is taken out of the present moment. Our choices are then based on something that no longer exists, rather than current sensory information. When our reactions are based on past experience, we lose the opportunity to change our future karmic situation.

Karma can be seen as existing in three time frames: past, present and future. The karma of our past drives us to the present moment, and It is in that present moment that we find our opportunity for either a wholesome or unwholesome future. This is best done not by the choices based on our past experience, but by the choices based on the present moment. In order for us to make those choices, we have to be fully present, reflecting the reality of the present moment, without value judgments. In other words, we must be in the non-duality of pure awareness.

In order to achieve this state of pure awareness, a skill is needed: the discipline of meditation. Meditation quiets our discursive thoughts, allowing us to know the world before we become separate from it. In deep states of meditation, that feeling of separation from the world collapses into oneness, allowing a reflective quality to be present. It is in that place of reflection that we can find an appropriate response to the present moment.

The Buddha said that our life is in a constant state of flux. Even the present moment is ever-changing. Ideas and concepts keep us imprisoned in the past, with no hope of ever being in the present.

If reaction to the present moment can only occur in the past, then response can only happen in the present. But the response I think of here needs to grow out of reflection, not reasoning. Response is a product of the heart, not the mind, and meditation is the process of opening to the present moment through heart. Knowing reality through heart develops with practice, the practice of being with whatever is occurring here and now.

Buddhism is a path of response. The practice of reflection is the key to opening all the possibilities of the present moment, the field where life and all its options are played out.

We have the choice of being either the hero or the victim. Our life is being written moment by moment with a pen that lies just out of reach. Reflection allows us to pick up that pen and start writing, no longer oppressed by our past conditioning.

Shades of Gray by Ven. Sarika Dharma

From the beginnings of Western civilization, from the time of the Greek and Roman philosophers, the world has been explained in terms of opposites. Everything must fit into one of two categories. Black or white. Tall or short. Right or wrong. Happy or sad.

Either/or is the mind of dichotomies and separation. It demands an unavoidable choice between two possible alternatives, with no other options available.

To have such a mind interferes with our ability to see reality clearly and to live our daily lives effectively. We are limited in our understanding and that affects our thoughts and actions.

For example, if we view our behavior as either good or bad, we are proud of ourselves when we do something we see as good and we feel guilty or ashamed when we do something bad. Pride, guilt and shame are not the answer to changing our behavior. In fact, they stifle our development. Buddhism teaches us that when we make a mistake, we just try not to repeat it.

We learn and grow when we see our mistakes. There is no need to punish ourselves for them. As human beings, we contain everything. And accepting that everything expands our awareness and encourages us to allow ourselves to be who we are. It is not possible to make significant changes until we accept the part of ourselves that needs changing.

Either/or thinking is apparent in the view of body and mind as two different things. These two are not separate; they are one thing, like the two sides of a piece of paper. Mind exists in every cell of our bodies, and ultimately mind itself is body and body itself is mind.

Impermanence is a characteristic of all life. As we continue our practice, we see that form is actually activity and energy, and these are not dualistic. The Middle Way integrates it all.

Seeing thus allows us to be comfortable in the world. We don't need to constantly judge ourselves or others. Our hearts are more easily filled with loving-kindness and compassion. This is the way to make the world a better place.

Comments on The Diamond Sutra by Gunaratna Sarika

Before practicing Zen, mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers. While practicing Zen, mountains are no longer mountains and rivers are no longer rivers. After practicing Zen, mountains are mountains again and rivers are rivers again.

The Sanskrit title of this sutra is Vajracchedika. It is number nine of the Great Prajna Paramita Literature. The author is unknown, but the text is considered to have been written in the first century.

The theme of the Diamond Sutra is that all definitive things, phenomena and ideas are subjective and unreal, being merely manifestations of one's own mind. Even the highest conceptions of Dharma and of the Tathagata are mind-made and, therefore, empty.

For me, this work expresses true freedom, by showing one how to look at all dharmas in their true nature of equality. There can be no discriminatory thought or conditional concepts, if one is to truly see the sameness of all things.

I realize that to achieve this, I must apply it to all areas of my present life. Regardless of what I may be doing at any given moment, I must do so without expectation or discriminating thought. In mindfulness, all things must be accomplished in and for the moment.

In reality, labels only further create deeper ignorance and deception. To transcend this, I must turn within, going deeper into this journey, finding the place of "intuitive" understanding. Clinging to no-one, no-thing or no-place, but gaining from each vehicle what I can. Then it must be discarded. As one master put it, "While on the path, if you see the Buddha, kill him."

I take this to mean that we should not even cling to the Buddha or his teachings. Like the raft, which is useful when crossing the river, but not meant to be carried on one's back on dry land, we will reach a certain point at which we can even let go of Buddha and Dharma.

Buddha is Buddha, the awakened one, because he is free of the web of ideas. The true meaning of this sutra cannot be grasped intellectually, as true understanding is beyond all conception or discussion. The fruits of putting the teachings of the Buddha into practice cannot be described in words.

The Diamond Sutra points out that, in reality, there is no such thing as the "highest most fulfilled awakened mind." This is but another label. The only avenue to see the true tathagata of all dharmas is to perceive the root nature of things in the sense of non-discrimination. All are truly and ultimately one and the same.

The Buddha said to Subhuti, "Someone who looks for me in form or seeks me in sound is on a mistaken path and cannot see the Tathagata."

The following gatha ends this sutra:

All composed things are like a dream, a phantom, a drop of dew, a flash of lightning. This is how to meditate on them; That is how to observe them.

The Zen Path

by Rev. Chakara Dhammo

The Zen perspective develops a different scope from most other major Buddhist schools. Zen tells us not to rely on intellectual learnings as the way to liberation. Such practices as reciting sutras from memory, pujas (offerings), scholarly explorations, reliance on a teacher, etc., are de-emphasized.

If one is going to follow the example of the Buddha who developed while not relying on anything, then one should indeed not rely on anything, including the tradition. All systems that are susceptible to being so codified that they are crystallized are seen as inflexible and unadaptable and thus to be disregarded. Zen encourages intuitive development and a concentration on the mind so as to rid oneself of the kleshas or hindrances that cause our suffering.

Zen also emphasizes compassion, stressing the Buddha-nature inherent in all beings. Presence in the world of conditioning is prerequisite to being able to awake from the illusion conditioning brings. Beings who are not yet awakened deserve compassion and assistance, especially instruction in the way to achieve freedom from the samsaric world.

Practitioners are exhorted to live in a common sense way despite dwelling in a complex world. Liberation is not considered as a higher developed unworldsome realm. The path to liberation is to simplify, let go of attachments and minimize worldly pursuits. Create as little as possible demand or attention to oneself.

Hence, we can learn from and respect events of the world but also learn not to be dependent on them. The accomplished student will have the benefit of personally experiencing the impermanence of the world and know there is no reason to be bothered about transient transactions.

The Benefits of Yoga

by Julian Banzon

Meditation is the heart of most spiritual paths the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind and the transcendence of ordinary consciousness. To meditate one needs to be established in bodily equanimity for more profound experiences.

Hatha yoga's contribution to any spiritual practice, yoga postures (asanas), began in ancient times as a technique for stilling the body and mind. Today, these forms have evolved into a multi-faceted discipline with enormous therapeutic value.

Practiced for thousand of years by cultures of the East, yoga asanas have gone mainstream globally as a means to fitness and well-being. Scott Conlin, a Glendale chiropractor, recommends yoga to his clients as part of good spinal hygiene. Mutual of Omaha, an insurance company, pays for the prevention or reversal of heart disease through Dr. Dean Ornish's program of meditation, yoga exercise and vegetarian diet. Ninety to ninety-five percent of those patients have been able to avoid bypasses and angioplasties. Not only is yoga exercise healthy, relaxing and a great workout, but it is indeed an intelligent response to the demands of today's urban lifestyle.

Because asanas combine the physical aspects of stretching movements with the inner aspects of mental focus, breath control and relaxation, practitioners find it more enjoyable and fulfilling than other forms of exercise.

There are two basic kinds of asanas: those that serve the meditative process and those that purify and balance the body/mind. This practice has universal values that can be utilized by other paths towards higher states of consciousness and enlightenment. Whether this is called Zen, Taoist, Arhatic, Christian, Tantric or Vedic yoga, the basic features of the postures remain the same. This generic essence is yoga's contribution to the many rivers seeking the ONE OCEAN.

Buddhism and God: A Clarification by Bhikkhu Chakara Dhammo

A question may naturally arise when contrasting the words Buddha and God. People who practice western religions may inquire as to the Buddhist attitude toward God. And they may get the impression that, according to doctrine, Buddhism would, at least from a philosophical position, tend to negate the concept of God altogether.

Today, if one visits Buddhist cultures one may see apparent evidence to the contrary, for example, the presence of many figurines and images of respect and much talk about various heavenly or deified beings. Yet, according to Buddhist philosophy, one is to expect a non-relationship with any kind of god among Buddhists. How is one to understand this relationship?

First, look at the term Buddha. It does not apply to anyone or anything. Buddha is a word which means awakened or fullyenlightened, but it is not applied to any specific subject. It's not the name or title of anyone. Rather, it refers to one that is awakened from all the trappings of worldliness and is clear of any identities or notions including those related to the idea of an essence or self.

Over 2500 years ago, Siddhartha Gautama, the only son of a king who ruled a small kingdom near the Himalaya mountains, renounced his worldly position, including his inheritance of the throne. At the age of twenty-nine years old, he left home in order to find a way to end suffering for all beings. He determined that reliance on authority could not guarantee freedom from the manifold worldly conditions.

Resolving to use introspection and find purity, he strove through many levels of different experiences. This included realms that may be described as being heavens and their denizens as being gods. Having abided for some time in those realms, he found the gods not to be totally free or unconditioned, rather they abided in a rare kind of existence.

Thereafter, he proceeded to a further development, that which is pure, eternal and unmitigatedly free from all sources of prejudiced notions and conditioning, and is without essence, termed Nibbana in Pali and Nirvana in Sanskrit, "cooling," where his pursuit successfully ends. He is Buddha, awakened. He does not refer to himself as god nor with any other definite designation.

Thus, after his attainment, he taught the method termed The Middle Way and always advocated no total reliance on other authorities, as they may not be on the path of liberation. One needs to rely on the skill of one's development, on the unprejudiced astuteness achieved through diligence and practice of goodness and worthy character comportment. Buddha never set himself up as an absolute authority, nor did he want anyone else to be considered that way. He is not an object of devotion nor an embodiment of reality. Nibbana and the path do not contain any such taints or distractions. It is for purity only.

Hence, in Buddhism, the gods, their realms and their ways are not negated but are considered aside the path and are not to be relied upon as the realm where total freedom will be found. Nevertheless, it is recognized that everyone who follows the path in their lifetime may not be as successful as the Buddha. Therefore, it is permissible in Buddhism to respect experiential denizens of realms higher than the worldly, as they may be considered to be more refined and as such worthy, but one must recall that they are inferior to pure nibbana, which is beyond inclusivity of heavenly realms and creation/destruction, i.e., beyond moral dualism. Thus for this reason, gods are not advocated nor are they negated in Buddhism. Hence, the Buddhist orientation is non-theocentric.