

10 March 2010 Dharma Talk at Buddha Center Second Life
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The Day from Hell

(DoK leads the group through the A-B-C Mindfulness exercise)

I apologize for not showing up Monday, but the reasons for my absence gave me the topic of today's talk, A Day from Hell. How many of you have had a "day from hell?" A day where nothing seems to go right? Where the frustration level, the exasperation level, the annoyance level just keeps going up and up, until you are in absolutely horrible mood? That is the kind of day I experienced on Monday, and that is why I was unable to show up for my scheduled dharma talk. I don't want to make it sound like I had an absolutely, terrible, horrible set of experiences on Monday, nothing really bad or tragic happened. It was just that it was a day for which I had planned to take care of certain tasks and had allotted the requisite amount of time to accomplish those tasks, but when I started to actually do those tasks, nothing went as I had planned. I couldn't log on to the computer at the business office, I had to reset all security settings, they had been reset since the last time I used them, I tried to use the network printer from my laptop and it wouldn't work. I had to re-install the printer on my computer and couldn't find the installation disks, and on and on. The upshot being that it took an hour and a half to do tasks that should have taken only 20 minutes. So I got a late start for the next part of my scheduled chores. I got on the highway to go to a store and as soon as I got on there was a sign that the two left lanes were blocked ahead. So it took 3 times longer than normal to get where I wanted to go. All in all, there were other minor annoyances going on, all of which prevented me from getting back in time to give the dharma talk I was scheduled to give, so that put me in an even worse mood.

So I now imagine that you all are sitting there thinking, Jeez, DoKwang is Dharma Teacher, he's been practicing meditation for all these years, and even *he* has a bad day? Yes, even DoKwang can have a bad day. The thing that was important about having this day was that it highlighted for me the advice I give in many of my talks about the importance of doing shadow work, of working on the emotional blockages we have. Work on emotional blockages is essential as part of an integral spiritual practice. Because as I was going through that day and my frustration level was going up, I stayed aware of what was happening as it was happening so I could immediately do one of the techniques, like breathing, the A-B-C exercise, Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), which is tapping on acupuncture points to release negative energy. Each time the frustration level mounted, I would be able to get it down to a manageable level until the next problematic situation occurred, so I had to do it again and again. That is the way things go a lot of times, and when things don't go right for me, even when small things don't go right, I can get very upset. I happen to be somewhat of a perfectionist, even though I've dropped a lot of that in the years since I began spiritual practice. As a boy and young man in school, I was very much of a perfectionist and an overachiever, and I never liked when things would go wrong, I wanted to be in control, and get good marks, etc.

So even today, as my day from hell demonstrated, there are still elements of that perfectionism, that need for control, that need for things to go right, or else I will get upset and cranky, or worse. That happens often with people who have engaged in some kind of spiritual practice. They begin their practice and then they will arrange their lives so as to support and encourage that practice and to reduce the stresses of the outside world. They will meditate a lot, make a lot of progress, and tell themselves, oh I am getting calmer in my daily life, I'm very spiritual. But then some crisis or minor annoyance happens, and they go back to their old ways of responding, or they talk with somebody with whom they have a problematic relationship, and they go right back to that same old way of responding, with frustration, annoyance, exasperation, anger, etc. What that means there is that there is good news and bad news about that reaction. Because nobody likes to feel that sense of frustration, especially people who have been engaging in a spiritual practice. They want to feel like, I have transcended all that, you know, I'm spiritually advanced, but when something like that happens it's showing us that that's clearly not the case. To be sure, people have made lots and lots of progress. The good news is that these frustrations that we encounter in our daily lives is showing us the next steps that we have to take in our spiritual practice, showing us the issues in our "shadow side" that we have not yet resolved and that are keeping us from making even more spiritual progress than we have already made.

A lot of times it is very difficult to let go of those compulsive emotional reactions, like on my Monday, I could literally feel my sense of frustration and exasperation building up, as well as my dismay. "Why was this happening this way?" and "This shouldn't be happening this way", and simultaneously telling myself, "hey, relax, Zen is accepting things just as they are, right in this moment, why are you getting upset?" Just let go of it, I'd tell myself but I couldn't let go of it just by thinking about it and telling myself to do so. And that's the dilemma that many people who follow a spiritual path find themselves in. They understand, they realize right away, that this reaction that is coming up is not a spiritual reaction and that it's not being released, but they feel powerless to be able to stop it, to reverse it. That's why I think that these techniques, breathing, expanding attention, EFT, are the tools we can use to release until we get to that point, where, like the Buddha, we are simply like mirrors and release them as they happen, just as a mirror releases the reflection of an object that is no longer in front of it.

Emotions are like a red hot coal that someone drops into your hand. If someone were actually to do that, if someone said, here, let me put something in your hand, didn't tell you what it was, and then dropped a red hot coal into your hand, you would drop it immediately, reflexively, without even thinking about it. The negative emotions we experience are like that red hot coal but felt internally. If we would so quickly drop a real, physical hot coal, in a fraction of a second, why do we have so much trouble dropping the emotional hot coals that occur within us on a daily basis? It boils down to fear, or anxiety, which is fear of subjective threats rather than objective ones. Fear/anxiety is the block to our spiritual progress. Fear has to do with letting go of something, a negative belief or a behavior pattern that has served to keep us "safe" in the past when we were experiencing real negative events in our lives. So that anger reaction, the frustration reaction, the exasperation reaction, is a defense mechanism that we have

used consistently and habitually and we don't let go of our defense mechanisms very easily, so it takes time.

I can recall several times during my past when I would be hit with a situation and it would really throw me for a loop, put me in a foul mood that lasted for days and days. And I got to a point in my spiritual practice when I realized that was going into that mood, and I said to myself, hey just drop it, and I couldn't do it. So the best thing to do if you can't let go of it is to acknowledge it, remind yourself that it's just an old defense mechanism and that you're not going to fight it. Rather, instead of resisting you accept it, and in acceptance it starts to fade. Using these tools will help it to fade more quickly and comfortably because you're willing to use these tools.

All of us go through these "days from hell" from time to time or perhaps more often. Instead of dreading them, we have to look at them as opportunities to make spiritual progress. As I realized the level of negative emotion was building up on Monday, I took steps to reduce it and let it go. The more we do that, the easier it will be to let go of things that happen in the future, and even major annoyances will not have the same sting that they had. The things that happened to me on Monday were not biggies, but they were really getting under my skin, and that's an indication of how much my perfectionism is still there and that I have another opportunity to let it go.

(A participant comments, this turned into eye-opening experience for you.)

Yes, it did.

(A participant questions, do all people have this experience or fear?)

I assume from the many experiences I have had in my life, all the relationships with family, friends and clients that yeah, most people feel this way, that most of the people in our virtual circle here, experience fear like this.

(A participant comments, time is always changing, after good times bad will follow and after bad times good will follow.)

Yes that's true. The Buddha says that all things are impermanent. No matter what is happening to you, just ride it out and things will change. The Buddha would say, just let it be what it is, without reacting to it. Since most of us have not realized that level of our level of Buddha nature yet, we have to do what it takes to let go of the hold that we have on these negative emotional reactions. This is what attachment is. The Buddha says that life is suffering, suffering is caused by separation and attachment and desire. This "holding" on to negative emotions is what attachment means. It's the inability to let go of our negative emotional reactions so as to allow us to experience the truth of who and what we really are. Don't feel bad about this. It took the Buddha six years to be able to get to that point so that he could live in that experience of total freedom all the time.

That is why I sympathize. That is why we come together, to learn what I can, especially from myself, to learn to release myself, and teach others to release themselves.

(A participant comments, many people are strong and don't have this problem.)

Many people are enlightened beings who have realized their Buddha nature, who can drop emotional attachments and reactions, whether through years of practice or like an Eckhart Tolle, who had a spontaneous enlightenment experience and was able to spontaneously drop it all. Those of us who have not had that spontaneous enlightenment experience and feel maybe a little envious, what we need to understand is that's the path that we decided to follow when we incarnated into this lifetime and that this so called suffering that we go through is the opportunity for us to learn how to drop it and be willing to drop it.

(A participant comments, we drop it and we pick it up, maybe it takes longer until we pick it up the next time. That's progress)

The criteria for effectiveness in any clinical work, the standard for clinical efficacy or "does it work?" for any new treatment or medication, are a reduction in the frequency, intensity, and duration in the condition being treated. The criteria for clinical efficacy for FDA drug trials, for any new medication, one that helps treat depression, or ulcers, or cure whatever, reduce arthritis pain etc., the minimum standard for clinical efficacy is 30%. If a drug or technique can reduce the frequency, intensity and duration of any issue or condition by 30%, it is deemed to be successful and effective and is approved legally to be sold as such treatment.

Each time we are faced with daily issues and challenges, we have an opportunity. Most people get in a bad mood and hold on to that bad mood, and blame the situation or the person, or him or herself. Then we compound that error by presuming that we have a right, that we are justified in being upset. "Don't try to take away my bad mood." "Look at what he did, look at what she said." If we can look at what's happening and take responsibility, not for what's happening but for our reactions to what's happening, then that is the beginning of wisdom, of transcendence, of enlightenment, of waking up. It's like you're a big fish, and life throws you a hook with a big piece of juicy bait on it, and you keep swallowing it whole until you realize that taking the bait is only going to keep creating even bigger problems for you. What's important is doing what we can, to just be aware of our bad moods even though we can't let go of them right now, to say, I'm not going to indulge it, to use our A-B-C techniques, until you decrease the frequency, intensity and duration of the moods until they disappear and dissolves altogether and go away.

(A participant questions, I have been through good times and bad times, if practice will the bad times become less?)

I believe that I just addressed that. Yes, but it's not that good times become more frequent, it's that you stop creating bad times because you stop reacting to them.

(A participant questions, can positive thought also help?)

Well, there's a whole school of thought that believes in what's called thought substitution and the power of positive thinking. I agree that positive thoughts are definitely better than negative thoughts, but the problem I see with positive thinking and thought substitution is that you are still giving power to thoughts, allowing them to rule your mood and still creating a sense of separation, still holding on to the issue, just not feeding that issue but feeding the opposite issue, that is, I want to feel good and I will use thoughts to make me feel good to counteract using thoughts to make me feel bad. When you understand that feeling good is who you are, that feeling expansive, feeling the inner energy, feeling the sense of connectedness, dropping the sense of separation, is *who you are*, and that you don't need thoughts to get you to feel that way, in fact that you have to get out of the way of thoughts and start taking your power back, then you've *got* it.

All of the problems of separation are due to the fact that way back somewhere in our infancy we started to giving thoughts more power than our true nature, our inner presence, and now we just allow the thoughts to rule our good moods and bad moods and forget that thoughts are just tools that we use to manipulate our reality, what we call objective reality, but they are not reality itself. We react to thoughts as though they were reality, we identify ourselves as our thoughts. If you think you know who you are, don't think about it again; because thinking is the problem, not the solution. The thing that is important is the solution, which is simply to get out of thinking mind and back to full presence in the here and now as you did in A-B-C practice. Shift attention away from thoughts; attend to breathing, feeling your inner body from the inside out, experiencing your sense perceptions without filtering them through thoughts and judgments of good or bad.

So sometimes we need to practice, as when we are meditating, to take time apart, sit, stop activity, and focus on this process of letting go. It's relatively easy to do when we can sit in a quiet room with no distractions. But it's not easy to do, because of our emotional attachments and blocks, when we are stuck in traffic on the interstate, or when we are trying to get onto network and it's not happening, or while you are having a disagreement with your spouse or partner. That's why we engage in spiritual practice. It's not about trying to feel good, or to "achieve" anything, least of all an "enlightened" state of mind. It's about dissolving the blocks that keep us from realizing who and what we really are. That's why it feels like work sometimes, why it seems like we go to a lot of effort for us to realize that life is effortless as long as we allow it to be. As I like to say, "Enlightenment is coming to the realization that you don't have to struggle and suffer to come to the realization that you don't have to struggle and suffer."

(A participant questions, will we feel good after we pull off the blocks?)

How did you feel during A-B-C exercise? What you are doing during that little exercise is dropping those blocks. For those fifteen minutes you are in a state of enlightenment, awakenedness. The trick comes in though, in maintaining that sense of connectedness

and awakenedness even when you're out and about, doing your usual daily activities and coming up against some of the challenges that those activities entail, just like in my "day from hell". When you can maintain that sense of awakenedness and connectedness, moment to moment to moment, then you've realized your Buddha nature. Or maybe we should describe it in reverse, that realizing your Buddha nature is being in that sense or feeling of connectedness and awakenedness and not in the emotional reactions to the activity that's going on in front of you. I didn't say that you wouldn't feel good. But feeling good is not the ultimate goal of spiritual practice. There are a lot of things you can do to feel good, but all of those things you could do are ways of circumventing the blocks, using artificial means, thoughts or material things to allow you to feel good. Whereas what spiritual practice is doing is helping you to dissolve the blocks to the good feeling that you are, that is always there, and you touch on it every time that you meditate or when something happens to allow you to just relax and feel good. That is not result of something happening to you. That is your true nature, who you really are, that you could feel all the time if you could release all the blocks. I'm not saying you shouldn't react to survival issues, I am saying that you don't react emotionally. Pulling your hand away from fire is something that will help you to survive and eliminate physical pain. I am talking about the emotional issues. If your hand is in fire and you don't pull it away and instead you start getting angry and cursing the fire, or you are afraid of the damage the fire is doing to your hand, but don't do anything to escape it. That is the emotional reaction I am talking about.

(A participant comments about feeling good about the real happy life he could have.)

It is the happiness, that inner feeling that is always there like the sun behind clouds. You need to get away from clouds or move the clouds away, dissolve them.

(A participant questions, if people around me very negative, should I move away from them?)

If you are in the state of spiritual practice your life where being in their presence and behaviors is causing you to react negatively, then yes, move yourself away from them but at some point, you will have to deal with them again. As you are able to dissolve the blocks more and more, you may be presented with that challenge again, and depending on how you react to them, that is an indicator of the measure of your spiritual progress.

There's a quote by Ram Dass, "If you think you're so enlightened, try spending a week with your parents." I'll give you a personal example. My parents, when I was growing up, were, shall we say, very challenging emotionally. I got to a point in my early adulthood, where I just had to separate from them. I did not communicate with them for several years, no calls, visits, letters, etc. I ignored all of their attempts to communicate with me. It was shortly after that time of the "break" that I started to engage in spiritual practices. Almost seven years after the "break", my father wrote me a letter, giving me the latest family news, saying that it would be really nice to see you again, and inviting me to an upcoming family gathering. I read the letter; I had rejected all of their previous attempts to engage me in communication. But I looked at the letter differently that day

and agreed to go. We met at a family function at which all my sibling were in attendance. I went and had a wonderful time, and have had a wonderful time all the times I've been with them since then. They are very nice people. Since that time, I have had great relationship with my parents, but before I had removed myself for those seven years, I couldn't stand to be with them, I mentally wished them all kinds of harm. I was being very "un-Buddhist".

Since the time of our reconciliation, they have not said a cross word to me, and if they did I would probably be able to handle it with a lot less reactivity than I would have before. Sometimes you just have to get away from negative influences to be able to release the blocks, to give yourself the space and the safety to release the defense mechanisms that you have been using up to that time to defend yourself against that emotional onslaught that we call objective reality, but they are not that reality in themselves. We react to thoughts as though they are reality, we identify ourselves as our thoughts

(A participant comments, if you think you know who you are, don't think again.)

Thinking is the problem not the solution. The thing that is most important is the solution, which is simply to get out of thinking mind and back to full presence in the here and now, as we do in the A-B-C exercise: shifting attention away from thoughts, attend to your breathing, your inner body, feeling the body from the inside out, experiencing the sense perceptions you are having but without filtering them through judgments of good and bad.

It's not easy to do when we're in the midst of a stressful experience. When we meditate, take time apart to sit, to stop activity, to focus on becoming present, it is easy to do. But it's not so easy to do in the middle of things because of attachments and emotional blocks. It's not easy to do when you're driving on interstate and have to be home, when you need to get onto network and it's not happening, when you're having a disagreement with your spouse.

Be glad when you did not have bad day, but when you do, use it as an opportunity
As a result of the awareness that was cultivated that day, the potential for bad days in future has been reduced. So it supports that old proverb by Nietzsche, "Anything that doesn't kill us just makes us stronger." :))