

FALL 2007: DISCONTENT IN DAILY LIFE

QUESTION: I have been practicing for almost thirty years. I find when I meditate or study dharma teachings, I feel wonderful, as if all my problems have disappeared. But that feeling doesn't usually last long. In my daily life at work and at home relating to my wife and children, I experience stress and anxiety. This manifests as a feeling of intense hunger, which causes me to overeat and occasionally causes severe muscle spasms in my lower back. I also struggle with feelings of sorrow and anger relating to financial problems and the behavior of others. I think about how my job and family situation aren't what I want them to be, and I fantasize about a life where I could spend more time meditating and studying dharma, which only exacerbates my feelings of discontent.

Evidently I keep my act together in some ways, because my teacher wants to certify me as a dharma teacher, but I feel like a fraud because of my personal situation. Please help.

NARAYAN LIEBENSON GRADY: This is a classic dilemma that many practitioners struggle with in this day and age, and I know it must be extremely frustrating for you after so many years of committed practice.

Although it's not easy, I do think it is very possible to turn this around. You can begin by shifting your perspective and attitude toward the practice. Until you see that discontent is created by a false separation between what is seen as practice and what is not, you will always be split between the two. Ask yourself what mind you are meditating with. Is it the mind that seeks only calm and tranquility, or is it the mind that is interested in discovering how things actually are?

In shamatha meditation, the goal is calmness and peace. In your formal meditation periods, this must be what you are experiencing. The problem is that this calm is not transferring to your daily life. Peace that only occurs during sitting meditation or while studying the dharma is conditioned peace - peace that only arises under particular circumstances.

The goal of vipassana meditation is wisdom. Wisdom emerges out of recognizing and observing the mind and body in a continuous way, regardless of what is happening. What we are truly interested in is an unconditional peace - peace that is present in all circumstances. The only way to know this kind of peace is to expand what you are calling "meditation." A true understanding of the Buddha's teaching reveals that every moment is an essential moment in which to practice. Can you bring the same mind to the stress, anxiety, worry, and anger that you experience in your daily life as you do to the calm and tranquility that you experience in formal meditation periods?

Also remember that fantasy, even if about wholesome subjects such as a life of meditation, only takes away from one's life and causes it to remain fragmented. The trick is to use each moment that you are thinking "I wish I could meditate" to actually meditate. To actually meditate means to be aware that this thought is occurring and to observe your mind. In that moment, ask

yourself, what is happening? What is the quality of your heart? Can you relax and observe this moment as it is? Can you accept all mind states as they are?

Lastly, it's important to bring your real life to your teacher. We all want to present ourselves in the best possible way to the people we look up to, but if you don't bring your true situation and struggles to interviews, the help and guidance that you receive will be quite limited.