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Introduction to the Retreat Theme (dharmaseed.org 74773)

Creative Engagement with Strong Emotions Through the Three Characteristics -  
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1:25 Somebody already was talking about strong emotions. So, in the title, you have three different things: you have the creative engagement, you have the strong emotions, and you have the Characteristics. And we'll see how much we can cover in a day. But also, I think what is important is ..., [while] I can give some suggestions, ... really to do the work for ourselves. This is one of the great joys of meditation, that this is something we do by ourselves (of course, together with the group and together with the teacher).

2:11 So, I think one of the very important things to set forth is that, for me, .... I see strong emotions, actually, I see emotions as a creative functioning of the organism, [whether] that it be anger, that it be fear, that it be anxiety, that it be joy, that it be love, whatever it might be, these are all functions of the organism. But then, you have these functions of experiencing feeling, experiencing emotion, which also helps within ourselves, helps within relationships. But then, some of the emotions can be intense. And then sometimes they can become very disturbing for ourselves, for others. So, this is something we want to look at today: How can we creatively engage when we feel emotions, and, specifically, strong emotions?

3:25 And then, there is another subject of the day. [It] is, How can insight into what is called in Buddhism the Three Characteristics help us with this creative engagement?

3:42 So, I am very aware that today we have people who have done meditation before and might be familiar with meditative terms, or Buddhist terms. I am also aware that some are new to meditation, or new to a retreat, or new to Buddhism.

4:01 So, just this morning, I guess again, the Three Characteristics are: change, sometimes called impermanence; the second one is *dukkha* which ... has three different meanings in terms of this section (it means "unsatisfactoriness," it means "unreliability," it also means "pain"). And this I want to look more at this afternoon. This morning, I want to look more at the first one, which is change, impermanence; and the third one, which is generally referred to as "not-self." So generally people translate it as "no-self," but what it actually means is "not-self." This is a very important distinction. It doesn't mean that there is nobody; it means that nothing exists independently of the conditions that constitute it. So, you could say that the third one is about conditionality.

5:20 But, let's look at the first one first, and see a little bit the connection of change with strong emotions. How to creatively engage? So, if we look at change, there [are] two different aspects of change. And this is something we can experience in meditation. I think this is very important, that whatever we talk [about] today is something we can explore when we meditate, but it's also something we can explore in our daily lives. So, it's not something too complicated and something too theoretical.

6:04 So, what does change mean? First one, is that things come up, and then they end. So this can be moment-to-moment. And we experience this often with sounds, like if you walk in nature, you hear the bird then it stops, [or] the wind in the trees, then it stops. Myself, here at the moment in France, it's raining a lot; so sometimes I hear the sound [of] the rain and it stops. So, something comes up and then it stops.

And then, there is another type of change, which is change within itself. So, you have something which is more continuous, so which lasts a little longer, but within that continuity it also is changing. And I think this is what is interesting, in terms of change. So that's when [a] thing comes and goes, when [a] thing continues a little more, or it changes within itself.

7:11 And then, there is ending. You could look at ending as ultimate ending. And so, you could look at it in terms of death. ... I studied in Korea for many years long ago, and my Korean seon teacher ... would give a talk, and suddenly stop, and say, "Look, your life rests upon a single breath." Then he would say, "What are you going to do now, with this life, which is so precious?" And actually, this really changed my experience, [realizing] just that my life rests upon a single breath. So, this is making you really aware of this present moment. ...

8:18 But, you see, you could see, change can have a little of what I call a little superficial aspect. When things change and you think, "Ooh, it changes, [but] who cares?" You know, like a vase is broken: "Who cares? Especially if it's not mine, and especially it's not me who did it, who cares? This happens." And so, it can be used in a little bit of an artificial way, which I think we have to be careful about.

8:55 And personally, when I saw my father die, I saw his last breath, and actually then I really understood what my teacher said, that really life rests upon a single breath. And when I saw that, and I really knew it in that moment, then compassion arose, and it really from then on changed my relationships, especially with my mother. So, instead of meeting her as all the history we had together, I met her in the moment, in this moment, this person. A life rests upon a single breath. And I must say, it totally changed my relationship, a kind of more human to human. And so, this is what is interesting with this kind of ultimate change.

9:52 And sometimes, we are caught in really strong emotions about ourselves, about others. And then, it's kind of like, we fix ourselves, we fix others. And then, it's "They're always like this, they're always done that." And then, to realize, "Wait a minute, how is the person in this moment? Because are we meeting the person right where they are now? Are we meeting ourselves right where we are now? Or, are we meeting an image of somebody from the past, which we bring into the present?" That I think is something interesting to look at.

10:43 \_\_\_ of strong emotions that actually you have had strong emotions in the past. They're finished; like all things, they come and they will go. But then, suddenly you re-meet the person again which is connected to the strong emotions and pahh you bring them in. But, you might be somewhere else. They might be somewhere else. And this is the other aspect of change, that change is actually saying,

making us experience, that we are not fixed. So, to me, this is what I call the gift of change: that I can change, the person can change. It doesn't mean that I will change fast. It doesn't mean I will change immediately, or the person will change immediately. But there is the possibility, at some point, that it can change. This is, I think, very important, to really know that. So again, you're not fixing yourself, you're not fixing the other, and then you have the possibility of the creative engagement.

12:14 So, for example, we grieve. My father died, then my elder brother died also. And, each time, I noticed the same thing. And, I was a nun at the time, doing lots of meditation. So, the fact that you do meditation or the fact that you're a nun is not going to stop you from feeling grief. So, I felt grief, in both cases. And, in both cases, it was very similar. And, I could observe change. So, I could observe the grief as a very strong emotion, in terms of sadness, in terms of crying. At the beginning, I would cry nearly every day, at times. And then, I would cry every day, but just a little less. Then I would cry once a week. Then I would cry once a month. And it would just come, like this. It's not like me thinking anything, but suddenly, it would come, and then I would cry. And then, over the year (I would say, generally, for me, this kind of grief takes a year / a year-and-a-half), and then over the year / the year-and-a-half, then that grief of crying then slowly slowly slowly changed, and then stopped. And then, what was left was, not nothing, but what was left was what I call the creative function of sadness, [which is] that you feel sad because you lost someone, and, at the same time, in the sadness, you can have the joy that that person existed in your life. So, the grief is the grief of the shock, the grief of the loss. And, that can be quite intense in many different ways. And, so we should be very careful when somebody [has] lost someone and, after two months, you say, "Can we get over it?" No, no, they're not going to get over it; it's a shock to the system.

14:36 It's very important to see that strong emotion is not just emotion. It's sensation, it's thought, so it's something that the whole organism is feeling, and, I would say, for a good reason a lot of the time. And then, change will make it change, because life happens, other things happen. And then, it will become a feeling of sadness, which comes and goes. And you have some time (or not, in terms of the person).

15:16 Then, in terms of change, .... And looking at feeling, before you could say it becomes a strong disturbing emotion, I can make a spectrum: you have a feeling and then it can become [a] very strong, overwhelming, disturbing emotion. And to me, one of the things which is interesting, in terms of daily life, is, you feel something. So, one moment, you're not feeling something special. And then, something happens: you see something, you hear something, whatever. And then, you feel different. And then, the question, in terms of the meditation practice, is, "How long does this last?" Because personally, I don't know, everybody might not be the same, but personally, I would say, I feel it within myself. So, I feel in the chest area, in the belly, here I'm mm! mm! It's a little different possibly, it's a little unpleasant. And then generally, I bring the question, "How long will this last?" So, observing, "Is it going to change?"

16:43 And once, I had this [experience] long ago. It's one of my stories about this. [It] is with my husband, at night, in the city, where you don't know where things are, you get lost, you drive, and it's a little complicated, you get a little stressed. And so my husband says something a little rr! And normally, I would say something a little mm! unpleasant. But then, I think, "No, no, no, no. Okay, he said this, the situation is unpleasant, but how long is this unpleasant feeling going to last?" So I just sat there, observed. And, it lasted between two lights, two red lights. And then, it was really gone.

17:34 And so, this showed me that there're actually three different levels, you could say, of feelings-emotions. You have the light one. So, just like that. And so, you have a light unpleasant feeling, and, if you don't do anything, generally it passes. Then, you can notice what I call habitual and that's where the third Characteristic comes in. Because the third Characteristic is basically saying, "Things are not fixed. Things come upon condition." So, not-self is saying, "I am this flow of inner conditions meeting outer conditions." And so, some of the conditions are relatively constant, I mean, continuous. I mean, until I die, I think it's relatively unlikely that I will become a pink elephant. That, I think, is relatively unlikely. But, there could be a different change; but, at one level, people can [still] recognize me, because I look relatively the same, up to a point. So, you have this continuity; but, within that continuity, I can be really tired, or I can be really joyful, or all kinds of things can happen. And it depends a lot, not just on me, but what I am in contact with. And, that's what I find interesting, looking at ....

19:26 So, you have feelings, but then you have *feelings* which are a little recurrent. So, it starts to be a little more emotion. And [then,] you can feel impatience, you can feel irritation, you can feel jealousy, you can feel anxiety, you can feel all kinds of things. But you don't feel them to the same degree all the time. Because, as I said before, anger is a creative function, to do something about something. Sadness is a creative function of losing something or meeting with suffering. Anxiety, I think, is a kind of fear, a survival mechanism. Etc., etc. So, all these are functions. But then, they can become habituated. And then, certain things might make you angry, might make you anxious, might make you jealous, might make you happy, might make you etc., etc. And then, the third Characteristic comes in. [It] is to investigate: I don't feel angry all the time, I don't feel anxious all the time, I don't feel happy all the time, or whatever it is. So, what are the conditions, if suddenly you find yourself irritated, or impatient, or anxious, or sad, or whatever it might be. And it's different, like, you are relatively okay, and then, it's there. And then, you can start to investigate, to explore, that generally you've got a contact as a trigger, you've got contributing factors (like not sleeping well, being ill, being stressed.... There are many different contributing factors). And then, certain conditions come together. And then, you are angry, impatient, or whatever it might be. And that is interesting to look at. But, to know that it's always easier to look at it when it's light, that's what I find interesting.

22:05 The second level, habitual, becomes a little more sticky.

22:10 And then, you have the third level, which I call intense. And so, maybe, that's why the strong emotions. And, it's, suddenly, you feel something really intense. And, this is because it's a shock to the system. So, something surprising, some-

thing you did not expect, whatever it might be, something suddenly happens. And, it really impacts you. And, it's very important to see that, ... the thing with intense is that, when we feel intense, immediately we have the feeling, "This is going to last forever." This is one of the things we can notice.

23:00 The way I notice it, personally, is very minor, mostly in terms of sensation. Like, when I sit in meditation, sometimes, I get a little itch in the cheek. And, when I feel this, I have the impression, "This is going to last forever." And then, I go inside it, I notice how it's changing, shifting within itself. And then, suddenly, it's all gone. But, when I [first] feel it, immediately I have the perception, "This is going to last a long time."

23:40 And so, when we are in an intense state, it's important if we can remember there was a shock to the system. It's intense, and it is not going to go away fast. This is the thing we have to see. So, it might last a day, it might last a week, it might last a year. Of course, it's not going to last the same all the time. It will come and go. But, because of the shock to the system, it's going to reverberate through the whole system. And I think then, the meditation is a little different. It can help us in terms of noticing, "This is intense. How can I not make it more so (that's if we can)." And then, in terms of the meditation, just to create a little space. Not [that] the meditation is going to stop the intensity; but, the meditation could help us with creating a little space of a few seconds, back to the breath, or lovingkindness, or whatever type of meditation works for us. Just to create a space. And then, you go back into the intensity. And then again, you can maybe go for a walk, you can look at nature. And then, again, create a little space. And then, you could come back. But slowly, slowly, again, it will change over time.

25:45 So, that's what I wanted to say in terms of the subject, to bring in the subject.

25:55 And so, in terms of creative engagement, the creative engagement is bringing up, "Oh, I have this feeling, how long is this going to last?" Or, you're experiencing something: "Ahh, I am impatient, I am angry, or whatever it is. What is going on? What are some factors which could have made this happen?"

26:30 And, I know, for myself, one of the things that would make me a little impatient was when I was tired. When I used to be tired, before I noticed it ... I would become tired, which would innervate? / enervate? my nervous system. And, feeling innervated?, I would look for somebody to be innervated? with, which, long ago, I would choose my husband. And he must have done something, and then he would say, "I did not do anything." And then, I would say, "What's going on? Why am I feeling innervated(?)?" And then, going backwards, I started to realize when I'm feeling tired, I'm getting innervated?, and then, I'm looking for a target. Then, it could be better to go and rest.

27:29 So, I think it is very important in terms of the second Characteristic, to really be aware of what I call the contributing factor: of stress, of tiredness, of not sleeping well, or having too much to do, whatever it might be. That I think is really important, to notice, "I don't feel like this all the time." Some factors can make it happen more easily.

28:00 And then, when it's intense, to really just [say], "Okay, it's intense. So how can I be with this?" And you can be with this in different ways. I think, when it's intense, I would not necessarily recommend sitting meditation. Not necessarily. It might be better to do exercise, it might be better to go walk in nature, it might be better to talk to somebody. There's many different things we can do. But, if we feel it's okay for us to sit when it's intense, it's noticing, "What's going on? What am I feeling in the body? How is it changing? The sensations, the feelings? But also, I think, how the mind contributes?"

29:00 Often, when there is intensity of emotion, there is what I call rumination. We go on and on and on. And then, we often go into the past, and then, we go into the future. And so, seeing the rumination, not judging it, it's really normal, that's what we do when this kind of thing happens. But, is there a way that, within that intensity, I could feel a little calm? So, this is the creative engagement there: "How can I feel the intensity without being overwhelmed? And how, within that intensity, I can feel either a little calm, or I can somewhat dissolve the energy of the intensity, maybe by going for a walk, for example, or writing down in a journal?" I think different people have different creative ways to engage. And during the discussion, we can talk more about this. So this is what I wanted to suggest.

30:28

31:09 When we do the meditation, what is very important [is] that we have this caring and careful attitude, that we have a friendly attitude. And, I think, if we bring this attitude to the meditation, being caring and careful, then this is going to help us also to bring a caring and careful attention to the emotion. Because, sometimes, we totally get lost in the emotion, or, sometimes, we totally, kind of, [say,] "I don't want to experience this." And here, it's saying, "Can I be friendly with this experience I am having now?" 31:59

32:38 And so the idea in the meditation is really, at one level, possibly the focus on the breath. Also, feeling how the breath changes: the air comes in a little cooler, comes out a little warmer. So, you can be aware of the sensation of the air going through the nose, or you can be aware of the breath in the abdomen. Again, whatever suits you. Just being aware of the breath. But, within being aware of the breath, as an experience, also knowing we share this air with everything that lives. And also, that experience, our life, everyone's life, is resting on a single breath. So, again, that experience of the potential for life in each breath. So that's what I wanted to say.