

Dharmette: It's OK

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 7, 2010

I was reminded this morning, as I have been periodically over the last months, of the great American mantra, "It's OK." "It's OK" is a very powerful mantra. It's what we parents often use for our children. And it's a magical mantra because – what does "It's OK" mean when the kid has scraped his or her knee and there's blood everywhere? Maybe it's more realistic to get really anxious around the kid and say, "Oh my God this is terrible; you might get infected; and who knows you might get gangrene, and you might lose your leg, and this could be the end of your career as a soccer champion." It's like "Oh no, I've failed as a parent." That's one option.

But usually parents don't say that. More likely they'd say, "It's OK; come here; it's OK; we'll clean it; it's OK." There's something very important for these little kids saying it's OK, reassuring and supporting them. So what is OK? It's not OK that they hurt their knee, but in the bigger picture of things, it's OK. In the bigger picture about how their life is unfolding, it's not that important that they scraped their leg. There are many more important things in this life than an infection in their leg, even though it is to take care of that.

And when a parent says, "It's OK," I think the good parent is very committed to trying to take care of it with the best he or she can. They'll clean the wound; they'll disinfect it; they'll put a band-aid on it; they'll do what they need to do. "It's OK" is not saying, "It's OK; let's leave the wound to take care of itself; go back out in the playground, and don't worry about the dog shit that's out there; it's all OK." That's not what's being said. It's something deeper, broader than it's OK.

In Tibetan Buddhism they have this very powerful mantra that's six syllables: "*Om mani padme hum*." The American version is, "It is really OK" (also six syllables). It doesn't have quite the same rhythm as "*Om mani padme hum*" – maybe because we haven't said it enough. Maybe if we say it as many times as the Tibetans have, we'll get into the rhythm: [slower] "It is really OK."

In terms of meditation practice, to have this mantra, "It's OK," or at least the attitude that it's OK is teaching the heart something important that we need to learn. One thing that's encouraging is that the heart can heal itself, can take care of itself, if we get out of the way.

And often it's the way in which we get anxious or aggressive or upset, or the ways we try to manipulate and fix things, that often stirs up the pot and makes things worse. It certainly makes things worse in the sense of making it difficult for everything to settle down and relax. And so to say, "It's OK" is an encouragement to get out of your own way. Don't interfere with what the heart can do on its own. The heart knows how to take care of itself – just as a wound knows how to take care of itself. The body knows how to take care of a wound, if you clean it and protect it. The physiology of healing a wound is very complex: all the chemicals, blood, and everything that goes on to heal the wound. And it's amazing that this goes on without our conscious manipulation or our conscious engineering of it. In fact, if we were going to engineer the healing of the wound, we would probably have to have a greater processing power in our conscious mind because it's so complex. But somehow the system knows how to do it. Our job is not to do the healing. Our job is to make sure the healing is not interfered with. So we clean the wound and we keep it covered and then we leave it alone.

It's the same thing with the heart or the inner wounds or difficulties we have. The mantra, "It's OK" is a way of keeping it clean and putting a bandage over it, getting out of the way and allowing something else to unfold, for the natural healing process to happen. With a cut on the knee, sometimes it hurts for a while. Sometimes it hurts to wash it and put the disinfectant on it. So, you're not necessarily making the kid's life more pleasant when you say, "It's OK." You just put this disinfectant on it. They have to deal with that. It's the same thing for our hearts with the mantra, "It's OK." Sometimes it can sting a little bit or be a little bit awkward. But to get out of the way and allow something deeper to unfold is a very powerful thing.

Part of the mantra, "It's OK" is an encouragement to look at how we relate to things as if they're not OK. And some things, of course, are not OK. So it's not justifying everything. But it's useful to question the movements of,

"It's not OK," which – more often than not – have to do with anxiety, ambition, greed, fear, and not with something that's really innate. So perhaps we can have the mantra, "It's OK" and use that to massage or relax that muscle of, "It's not OK." And the more we can relax that, the more likely it is that some inner unfolding or healing has a chance to move through us and to develop and happen. There's more going on here than your conscious mind. In the same way, there's more going on in your healing of a scrape on your knee than you can consciously be aware of. And so, it's OK to trust this, to allow something to happen.

It's OK is also an encouragement to look at things in a different, wider, more universal perspective than the one you happen to be using. If the kid scrapes their knee and can't go out and play with their friends, that's the perspective the kid's going to be upset about, and that might be the drama they're living in. But in the bigger picture of a lifetime, it might actually be much more important that the parent was there to hold the kid who was crying, and to care for and attend to the kid. And the kid sees that, "Oh, there's a community of people here who care for me." That might be actually much more important than the perspective the kid had in the moment.

So what perspective are you bringing to bear on your problems, to the issues in your life? Do you have a very small perspective in the immediate moment? Do you have something to do with your self-identity or with your desires? Or do you have a bigger, broader perspective that includes something more universal?

How is it that we're held by the Dharma? How are we held by our wider community? How are we held by the world, by this universe of ours? Where do we fit within the universe?

A childhood experience that I had regularly, that I think was meaningful for me was when I would lie in bed before falling asleep, and I would think about the universe – whatever understanding of the universe I had – all the stars and the galaxies. I would think about my death, and I thought my death was rejoining all that, and I thought it was quite beautiful. I was very comforted. I'm not going to exist when I die, but I didn't mind because I was going to become all of this, and it was very meaningful for me – as opposed to the drama of what happened in school today when Susie stole my pencil or Charlie wouldn't talk to me. What perspective do we have?

It's OK. The universe is there for us, or the mind – the very profound mind that can let go – is there to hold us. Or there's a wonderful feeling of metta or loving kindness where there's a deep sense of love or security or happiness that's not connected to getting all the little details of our life lined up just right: having the right job, or the right relationship, or the right whatever. So for me, while the mantra, "It's OK" can appear superficial, with some reflection, it points to something very deep and profound and meaningful. And perhaps it encourages you to relax and let go and allow yourself to be alive – where just being alive is enough. It's enough. It's OK.

And if it's not OK, that's OK too. So thank you.