

Dharmette: The Ordinary Mind

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdaal on March 30, 2011

There's a Zen koan I'm fond of, although I wouldn't pretend to understand it. It says that someone asks a Zen master in China, "What is Buddha?" And the Zen master says, "Ordinary mind is Buddha" – which kind of goes against what most people think. If you're ordinary, certainly you – your mind – is not a Buddha. You're practicing in order to cope, and to deal with your attachments, fears and desires. This mind can't be Buddha.

But the ordinary mind is Buddha. I like this because it's a bit of an antidote to the idea that becoming a Buddha – being enlightened or spiritually mature – is some extraordinary state, which takes you out of the world, out of the ordinary stuff. Maybe it makes us just more ordinary than we are.

I wanted to introduce you to an idea that I found very helpful in practice, which is that whenever you hear Buddhist teachings, a good vantage point from which to try to understand them is to reflect on how you already know what you're being taught. What experience do you already have that makes this true for you? And in what areas of your life is it true?

It's easy to hear Buddhist teachings as being lofty. After all, Buddhism is one of the great world religions. So it must be really a lofty, powerful thing that you have to study a lot before you can understand it. But don't do that. Rather, listen the best you can, and then say, "How do I already do this? How do I already know this?"

For example, the heart of the Buddha's teachings is the Four Noble Truths. You hear that there is suffering; there's a cause for suffering; there's the cessation of suffering; and there's a path to the cessation. You can try to study and understand it – the twelve different stages, aspects, or spokes. You can get into the details and subtlety of it, and get more and more confused. Or you can ask yourself, "How do I already know that this is so? Do I already know that some of my suffering and stress is because of how I cling? Have I seen how letting go of and ceasing that clinging leads to ending that suffering?" What might come to mind immediately is, "No," because you are focusing on your big existential issues. But ask again, "How do I already know that this is true?"

It might be true when you are at a traffic light. You're driving along; you see the light turn yellow and then red, and you have to stop. You feel how uncomfortable and distressing it is, because you have an important place to go to, and you're late getting there. You're very impatient for the light to turn green, and it turns out to be an extraordinarily long red light. You feel the agitation build, and then some driver going crosswise to you tries to get across to the other side, but doesn't because there are so many cars backed up, and they can't get out of the intersection the whole time the light is green for you [laughter]. You can't go anywhere, and the impatience gets more and more worked up, right? That's the suffering. So maybe you can see, "Oh, I'm suffering because I'm holding on to wanting to get someplace and having my way." Since a traffic light is a relatively minor issue, maybe you can realize, "I can just sit back, relax, and let go."

It could be some really simple, ordinary thing in daily life, like you were counting on having toast with jam. You put the bread in the toaster; your toast is done; and then you go to the refrigerator, and find that there is no jam. You feel this distress, and it occurs to you, "It's okay. I don't need to have jam today. I'll let go of it. Maybe I'll just have butter, or peanut butter, and let it go. That's okay." In that letting go of the attachment to jam, and ceasing that discomfort you have, you've discovered the Four Noble Truths, or at least the first three.

Likewise, in letting go of your impatience with the traffic light, you discovered the Four Noble Truths. They're operating for you in a very simple, ordinary way. I would argue that all of you know very well the Four Noble Truths, or the first three at least. You wouldn't have gotten this far in life unless you had succeeded many, many times seeing your suffering, seeing the cause of it, and letting go. Standing in line at the supermarket and getting impatient, you realize that there's no point to being impatient here. The line is going to take however long it's going to take. I'll let go, and stand here. That's the first three noble truths.

We already do it, and we do it a lot, I believe. So if we see that we are already doing it, then perhaps what Buddhism is suggesting is: Can you spread it out, and do it in places where you haven't yet done it? Can you expand it out further and further into your life, from something very ordinary? I would argue that it is very ordinary

to let go of your impatience at a red light. Maybe you can think of better examples for yourself – some very ordinary, simple ways in which you do it already. It's ordinary mind – but we're trying to spread it out, and integrate it into all aspects of our life.

Those insights and understanding – which we're already doing – we apply in more and more areas, including those that are really hard. Those places where our attachments are deeply embedded may be hard to see and let go of. For example, the attachment to life and being alive is very powerful. People think it's reasonable, but it's going to cause a lot of suffering if you have it at the wrong time. To face our attachment and really work with it is not an easy thing to do. But it's still the same ordinary thing as a traffic light. It's just that the stakes are much higher. It's the same principle: if you're attached, you'll suffer. If you let go of the attachment, that suffering goes away. There are a lot of powerful places – attachments to relationships, opinions, identity – where we're encouraged to extend this very simple insight.

I believe that sometimes it is a lot easier to be inspired, or to find Buddhism meaningful, if you begin with the notion that you're already doing these things, and then question, "How is this already true for me? And given that it's already true for me, how does it make sense to expand, develop, or grow it out into my life?" Then it becomes personal, meaningful, and your own. But if you take it as being a lofty philosophy that is so far and distant from anything that you can manage to do today, then it can be discouraging.

I would like to believe that the Buddhist path is mostly made up of the continuity of many of these small steps. To begin understanding how it works in these small, ordinary ways, and doing it continuously through the day builds momentum and support. So when you meditate, come on retreat, and come into the big crises of your life, you have familiarity, understanding, and momentum with this process. You begin to recognize really well: "Oh, here's suffering; here's clinging; and here's letting go. I know that I've exercised that muscle a lot at the traffic light, the supermarket, and all these different places in my life. And now I'm being tested, and asked to do it at a time of crisis. Since I'm familiar with this, maybe it's easier for me to do it. I'm not being asked to do something supernatural, or to do something that requires a foreign belief system or metaphysics. Rather, I'm being supported to thoroughly do something that is pretty ordinary."

So I hope you take your ordinary mind, the ordinary things you can do, and make them extraordinary – so you can be really ordinary. Thank you.