

# Dharmette: Caring for the Inner Life

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsda1 on November 28, 2012

Here's an interesting question: "Once your basic needs are met, what's the most important thing to do next?"

The way the Buddha set up monastic life was to first ensure that monastics had all their basic needs taken care of. Probably most people in the modern world wouldn't recognize the importance of having just their basic needs met. But for Buddhist monastics, the idea is to have the food, medicine, shelter, and clothes they need – but nothing extra – so that they can be comfortable and healthy. We need enough food; we need shelter; we need health care. Certain things are basic needs. Different people have different ideas about what those basic needs are, but once your basic needs are satisfied, then what's important next?

If you have a basic need to have shelter and you have shelter, is what's next to have a bigger shelter? Or if your basic need is to be able to get around and you have a bicycle, then that basic need is satisfied. If that is satisfied, do you need a fancier bike? Once you have met the basic need of some kind of financial security – maybe your retirement is taken care of – do you then need to have a bigger retirement account? If a basic need is to have work, do you then need to have higher status at work?

There are many things people pursue that aren't necessarily their basic needs. Some of the things people pursue are beyond their basic needs. There's nothing wrong with pursuing those things, but the question, "What's most important once your basic needs have been met?" puts the finger on a very important issue – an area of life to explore and consider. I believe that most spiritual traditions, especially Dharmic traditions like Buddhism, do offer an answer to that question. The answer is that once your basic needs are satisfied, what's most important is *caring* for people – caring for yourself and for others. The Buddha formulated this saying,  
*A wise person is someone who cares for and benefits themselves, benefits others, and benefits both self and others.*

So we care. Once our basic needs are met, caring is important. What do we care for? Do we care for people, and give them bigger houses than they need, or more expensive bicycles? What does caring mean? The Buddhist answer to that, I think, is that we care for people's inner lives. We care for their hearts. We care for our own hearts, for the quality of our inner life. The quality of our hearts and our minds is probably the most important thing we can care for once our basic needs have been satisfied.

In the Buddhist tradition, the heart is considered the place of the greatest wealth. If we really want to be wealthy, it's what we have in our hearts that really counts. Learning how to care for the quality of our heart – the quality of our inner life – is a big part of what Buddhist practice is about. To understand that it's valuable and important is one of the first big steps that people have to come to terms with.

There are a lot of messages and instincts inside us that we could focus on besides the quality of our hearts. We may think that our happiness will be found by acquiring all these other things. This can be a long, uncertain route towards something that could be done more quickly and directly by turning inwards and developing our inner resources, practice, inner capacities for peace, well-being, happiness, and compassion. These qualities are not guaranteed if you follow the route of having a lot of friends, possessions, or status. People pursue all kinds of things. Perhaps you can get some happiness that way, but it's not guaranteed.

Every single person has this tremendous capacity to have a heart, an inner life that's quite beautiful. Rather than calling it inner wealth, I like to call it inner beauty. In my experience, the most beautiful thing I've ever seen is a pure heart, a purified heart. Whether I see it in other people, or have seen it in myself from time to time, I find it the most beautiful thing in nature. To be able to touch into that, to know it and feel it, is one of the great things.

Some people make the argument that you can't do that – it's not good enough. It can seem selfish to put the focus on our own inner well-being, rather than on caring for other people. But by caring for ourselves, we're in a much better position to care for other people. For chaplains, offering spiritual care to others, it's said to be unethical *not* to be involved in self-care. In that intense job, if you don't have proper self-care, you can end up making problems for the people you are trying to help.

Often what we want to convey to people, by way of helping them, comes through by *how* we are more than by what we do. This is very true for parents. I know from being a parent myself that there can be a lot of momentum in worrying about the kids, and worrying about all kinds of things. "I have to take care of them. And these precious little things are so important – I have to take good care of them!" If what gets conveyed in "caring for them" is fear and dread, or that the world's a dangerous place, then it conditions them in a profound way, which probably does the opposite of what you are trying to do. If they fall off their bicycle, what may have more value for them in the long run is having your kids learn from you – picking up from you by osmosis – your sense of ease, and being at peace in that situation, rather than worrying. If they fall off their bicycle and hurt themselves, *how* you are with that might be the most important message for them.

I think that taking care of the inner life, the inner heart and the quality of it, is one of the great beautiful tasks of this human life. I don't think of this as selfish, because if it were selfish, it would be irritating and uncomfortable for the pure heart. It doesn't really work to have a pure heart and be selfish.

Focusing on the quality of the inner life, the quality of what goes on, thinking that it is valuable and important to care for the inner life can be looked at in a fresh way if you ask yourself the question, "Once I have my basic needs met, what's important then?" How do you answer that question?

And if you have good friends, you might want to ask them that question too – not to challenge them, but to hear from them, to explore it with them, and to see what happens in this exploration with a friend. "What do you think of this question?" How are we going to find ourselves in this question?

Those are my thoughts for today.