

Dharmette: Gladness Born of Confidence

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Meg Gawler on November 29, 2017

Last week Gil talked about restraint, and in particular the freedom that can be found when we practice restraint. He mentioned the precepts. If you're inclined to kill a living being, then you're better off practicing restraint, right? Restraint from taking what isn't given. Refraining from sexual misconduct. Refraining from lying or from harmful or hurtful speech. And refraining from intoxicating the mind. What he emphasized about restraint was the freedom that it gives us – the freedom to be an active player in our own destiny, by choosing an ethical life of non-harming.

What I'd like to emphasize today is the gladness that can be found in refraining from doing harm. We find cobwebs and a spider indoors, and we very carefully catch the spider and take her outside and let her go, and there's naturally a feeling of gladness when we do this.

This summer we had critters eating our tomatoes in the garden, so we got a Have-a-heart trap, and set it. I think it was mostly squirrels. We didn't catch any squirrels, but did catch a rat. There was peanut butter and lettuce inside the trap. So the next morning we come out, and there was the rat, obviously scared to be cooped up, so we put a towel over the trap so the darkness would help her relax a little bit, and then we drove far away to some uninhabited place, and opened the trap: and the joy that I felt when she ran out! She ran up the road trying to get away from us as fast as she could, and then she took a sharp left into the vegetation to start a new life. I was feeling joyful for the whole rest of the day, appreciating her freedom.

So, the gladness, the delight in living ethically, in avoiding harm. But living ethically also means becoming more and more attuned to our tendency to be reactive. It's easy to get triggered. Triggering happens in very gross ways sometimes, but also in very subtle ways. The only hope we have of not responding with reactivity is to be able to be mindful. The more we can cultivate our mindfulness throughout the day – not only when we're meditating, but in as many moments as possible – that's what gives us the opportunity for when an unskillful mind state arises, to be able to make a choice about how we respond to it.

If someone says something hurtful to me, and I'm not paying attention, maybe my first response will be to feel hurt, or to withdraw or – I probably wouldn't say something nasty back – but to take it on maybe. But if I'm mindful when a person says something hurtful, then I think, "Ah, this does feel hurtful." And then I think, "That person must have been struggling with something to have said something so unkind." And then I have a feeling of compassion for the person. And I can also see it through the lens of not-self. This is what they're saying, but this is not me; this is not mine; this is not myself. I don't have to pick it up. I don't have to bite the hook.

So every time we're faced with a trigger from the outside, or perhaps from the inside, some kind of unwholesome mind state that arises, there's a fork in the road for us. And if we don't have mindfulness at that moment, chances are we are going to go down the road of reactivity and perpetuating the wheel of saṃsara and suffering. But if we do have a moment of awareness, then we can decide, "Ok. What's the skillful way to respond to this?" And that's what puts us on the path to freedom. There is a lot of gladness that can be found when we're on that path to freedom.

We had a weird thing happen this weekend. My husband and I were out working in the back yard. And normally we don't lock the front door when we're home. Well, unbeknownst to us, this young drug addict walked into our house. We came in and found her wearing my clothes, my jewelry, his pants. She even took off the belt that was on his pants, and went into his drawer and found another belt that she liked better. She had moved things around. I have an overnight bag that I use when I come down here from Grass Valley, and she had put some fancy shoes and a fancy purse into my overnight bag. I guess she thought I needed that. It was just really bizarre. If I was the kind of person who was likely to become afraid, I might have reacted unkindly to her. Or if it had been one of my gun-owning neighbors, she might

have gotten shot. But I was really glad to see that my response was one of being more concerned with her well-being than worrying about the fact that she was playing dress-up with my clothes and was about to walk off with them. I was glad that the natural response was one of compassion, and I didn't feel defensive. Anyway, the story has ended well. She's now in a mental hospital. Apparently she had a drug-induced psychosis and had no idea what she was doing. I had a real feeling of gladness about what arose in both my husband and myself in response to that intrusion.

Gil sometimes tells the story of the prison project in San Quentin, and inmates have come here and given talks. One of the inmates said that what he had learned from this project is that "Hurt people hurt." And it's true that many people who come to this practice have experienced a lot of hurt. And this practice is an opportunity to stop propagating that hurt. Another inmate from a rival group in the prison said, "Yes. And healed people heal."

It's really by healing ourselves, by healing our own hurt, from all that baggage that we carry with us, that opens the door for us to start to be a healing force in our families, and in our communities, and in our society.

We talked this morning about the gladness that's born of confidence, and especially confidence in this path of practice. We know that it's helping us to let go of greed, hate, and delusion. We know that it's a practice that little by little – if we look back a couple years ago, we can see, "Yes, I'm not as reactive as I used to be." Maybe I'm a little bit kinder. And with this we see, "Yes, this path is valuable for me." And out of that arises gladness because we know that this path of the Dharma is a refuge for us, and a security we have.

Maybe we're having a really difficult time, and gladness is not the first thing that's going to come up because there are a lot of negative emotions. At least we can be glad to know we have a path of practice to help us deal with it.

What I wanted to communicate today is that in the conditions that the Buddha laid out as the path to awakening, gladness is one of those conditions: gladness that is born of confidence in the path. As such, it is transformative. It's one of those conditions that we cultivate that actually changes us and helps us along the path the freedom. It arises naturally out of faith or confidence, and it naturally gives rise to joy. What I'd like to close with is sharing with you how important it is for us to notice the confidence that we might find in the path, and the gladness that can arise from that. It is going to change us if we notice it.

It would be a shame to be real serious about our practice, and be hard on ourselves, and we've got to do better, never good enough. No! If you've been practicing for a long time, you may have a tremendous, rock-solid confidence in the path, and it's easy to feel glad about that. If you've not been practicing for a long time, you might have a little tiny seed of confidence. And that little seed can give you a little seed of gladness.

Say 'Yes' to your gladness. Let it nourish you.