

Ready to Change (4 of 5) Inspired and Elated

December 29, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

generosity, ethics, sensual desire, stain

Gil Fronsdal

Hello, everyone. This theme, “Ready for Change,” seems perfect for the end of the year. We are preparing ourselves so that we can be changed in a beneficial way in this new time. So how do we prepare ourselves? The Buddha prepared people for his liberating insights by giving Dharma talks that created certain mind states for people. I don’t know if “created” is the right word. Maybe the talks inspired them in people. Then when the Buddha saw that those five things were present in people, he would give them his deepest teachings.

What were those five things that the Buddha recognized in people’s minds? There was a readiness, a receptivity. There was also a malleability or workability of the mind. The mind was soft enough to really take something in and be changed by it. And the people were free of the hindrances. The fourth quality is usually translated as an elated mind. I think “inspired” is a good way of talking about it. The fifth quality is confidence. I like the word “trust” there. The word also means a kind of luminously bright mind.

Today I’ll talk about the quality of being elated or inspired. There is a way that this mind state can be so preoccupying that we can lose ourselves in it. That we might not be available to the world or to experience the teachings in such a way as to be changed by them. But it’s also possible to be inspired, gladdened, or elated in such a way that the mind gets quiet and still, to really listen well, to really allow the experience of the moment to penetrate deeply. I think the second type of inspiration is what the Buddha was pointing toward as he spoke of being inspired or elated or happy. The Buddha would inspire that quality in people by giving Dharma talks that covered a range of themes that really got people’s attention. His listeners became kind of absorbed or concentrated while listening to the talk.

These five qualities are all qualities of an absorbed and concentrated mind, like really present. And so he’d give talks about generosity. Exactly what he said is not specified in the texts, so we don’t know. What that means to me is that when it’s unspecified, it’s up to us to figure out and understand: How do we get really inspired? How do we become better people by reflecting on the topic of generosity?

I lived for years secluded from the world, living in deep mountainous monasteries in this country and in Asia. It was lovely – fantastic for me -- and I have no regrets about having done that. Now, it’s quite wonderful to be in society. Here I am in the middle of Redwood City, living the full life of a householder. I see how much generosity there is that I never knew about when I was younger. For example, raising children here and seeing all the adults putting on sports events, coaching, and doing all kinds of things volunteering their time. They give generously to make a rich life for the children growing up. I think it is really something to experience so much generosity for children. There could have been more, certainly, but what I saw was inspiring.

I also witnessed generosity when I was caring for my mother as she aged and, over time, went through dementia and died. Again, I saw so much generosity in the care home where she lived. It was phenomenal to me the care, kindness, and love that she received. Many volunteers came to offer extra things for the people there – musicians who played for them, artists, and all kinds of good things.

The Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City has become a wonderful collection of many generous people. It is completely run by volunteers who participate out of their generosity, their care, their love, their happiness. This phenomenal outpouring of generosity has allowed this community to grow and develop. We do so much here and at our retreat center in Scott’s Valley.

There is a lot of generosity that is inspiring and brings out the best in people. It does something to my heart that just makes it kind of open and soften.

And then there’s ethics. We can be inspired by people’s ethics. There’s plenty of it. If you read the news, of course, there’s the opposite of being ethical. Virtue doesn’t stand out in front-page news. But for every horrible

story in the news, there are lots and lots of unsung heroes of ethics – people who have committed to being honest, to not steal, not kill, not lie.

A lot of what people *don't* do is never seen because there's nothing to see. And so, it's not celebrated. It's not appreciated. But there's a phenomenal number of ethical people in the world. I see lots of little examples as I go through my day.

There are plenty of examples of the opposite, of course. But what does our mind focus on? What is the world we want to live in? Do we want to live in an unethical world or do we want to live in an ethical world? If we want an ethical world, then be ethical, love ethics, love virtue, and love this kind of world. Recognize it, see it, and appreciate how much it's here for us to be inspired by it.

In the Buddha's teachings, the absence of the hindrances is meant to be a source of gladness, contentment, and happiness. "Wow! Finally, I'm not in debt, not in prison, not a slave to the hindrances. I'm here and in a certain way more in charge, rather than having the hindrances and desires be in charge."

The Buddha gave a series of talks on the first hindrance: sensual desire. As a hindrance, it's clear it's a problem. I think he highlighted it as being a particular characteristic of the human realm. People are very driven by sensual desire and sensual comfort. There's a way in which there are dangers in pursuing sensual desires. Lots of people make all kinds of horrible mistakes and cause suffering in the world and harm others through the pursuit of sensual desires of different types. He talked about the dangers of it, and he talked about the vanity of sensual desires. It's interesting to think how vanity or conceit is part of desire, especially when it hurts other people.

The Buddha talked about the *stain* of sensual desire. In the modern English-speaking world, I don't think we like to think that there are stains. But some of the ways that people act around sensual desire – where they objectify other people and it's all about their pleasure, not about a human connection – can feel like a stain, a diminishment, a contraction within. In contrast, when we feel the benefit of how to live with our sensuality ethically, it can be inspiring. So to be inspired by this, to feel the goodness of it – what's going right in our life, so that we have the right balance of input into our heart – then our heart is not weighed down or struggling.

And how do we get the right input? How do we get inspired enough? Not the inspiration where we lose ourselves, but rather the inspiration that allows for a deep kind of availability, a full presence for this world and our experience, so that we're ready to be changed.

We are happy: "Yes, I have the courage, the willingness, and the availability of trying a new way and being a new way. To let go of some places where I'm stuck. To let go of some things I'm holding on to. Yes, I'm available." To be unhappy is the opposite of being ready for change – to be caught, tight, limited, and deflated.

These are all wholesome qualities. The Buddha said, "It is possible to cultivate the wholesome. If it were not possible to cultivate the wholesome, I would not tell you to do so. But it is possible to cultivate the wholesome, and so that's my instruction." These are some of the wholesome qualities that the Buddha held up as being valuable for us in preparing to be changed, to be open, to really let the full impact of this Dharma practice work. They are all about the mind: a ready mind, a malleable mind, a mind free of the hindrances, and an inspired mind. Tomorrow I will talk about having a trusting mind, a luminous mind.

So for today, if you'd like for your homework – your life work – see if you can tune in to the parts of what's happening here in this life of yours. The parts that make you happy, glad, and inspired. Notice how much priority, statistically in terms of time, you give to things which are the opposite of inspiring, the opposite of making you happy – because whatever your mind is involved in, it does have an impact on your mood or emotions or heart. Is your mind spending a lot of time with things that are not inspiring and not happiness-producing? And can you switch to having more percentage of the time – not all the time, but maybe just 10% more – focused on what's inspiring, what's happy and good?

I love the word "good" these days. What is really good, what's the goodness of the moment here? I hope that this homework – life work – of inspiration is good for you and the people around you today.

Thank you.