Deepening Practice (2/5): Living Life with Care

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Okay, so as I mentioned at the beginning of the guided meditation, in this series we're doing this week, we're exploring the Meghiya Sutta as teachings about what helps practice deepen. The Buddha is not giving instructions to just try harder. Instead, he's pointing to some supports and conditions that can help your practice deepen.

In the first talk yesterday, we explored spiritual friendship, the support of others on the path. We talked about the way that friendship helps us remember the Dharma and the practice, and the way that wisdom can come from the outside. It can help us not be so caught up in the enclosure of our views. Sometimes, something from the outside helps. When I use this word friendship, I'm not saying there have to be deep intimate relationships. It can just be comrades and associates, for example. Maybe it's just some of us here online on chat.

Today I'd like to turn to the second support that the Buddha offers Meghiya, which is the way that our actions shape the mind and support certain experiences to be present in the mind. This can be about the actions we take, the way that we're showing up in the world, and the relationship to how we see that in the mind.

I'd like to highlight a little bit more about Meghiya's story and narrative. As we go along this week, I'll be unpacking more and more of the details of this interaction between Meghiya and the Buddha.

Meghiya has gone to this lovely mango grove to meditate. He's found a quiet place, and he thinks it's going to support his practice. When he sits down to meditate, he discovers that there are all kinds of unskillful thoughts. His mind is agitated and busy, and he's having sensual thoughts, malicious thoughts, and cruel thoughts. After spending the day meditating and experiencing this, he goes back to the Buddha.

Here's what the sutta says. Meghiya is telling the Buddha, "How incredible, how amazing. I've gone forth out of faith from the lay life to homelessness"—that is, he ordained—"but I'm still harassed by these three kinds of bad, unskillful thoughts: sensual thoughts, malicious thoughts, cruel thoughts."

I think there's something very touching in this, that Meghiya is saying, "Well, you know, I ordained, I completely rearranged my whole life." He's done this out of faith. He believed that this is what was going to make his life better, and still he's having these troubles. Still, he's not able to just sit down and be completely settled.

Maybe this is important because some of us carry some version of this idea: "Oh, if I were sincere enough, then practice would be easier. If I changed my life enough, then my mind would settle. Or if I had enough commitment to practice, then I wouldn't have these thoughts." Maybe that's underneath some of our own experiences, that we have some of what Meghiya was experiencing too.

To be sure, sincerity, commitment, confidence, and life choices all matter, but they do not automatically erase the habits of the mind. They don't automatically make a difference in the conditions of the mind.

So Meghiya is telling the Buddha, "I ordained. I'm kind of surprised that this is what happened." It's also noteworthy to note what he's *not* saying. He's not saying, "I'm hopeless." Meghiya is not saying, "I'm really bad at this. I can never meditate." He's not saying, "I should be beyond this by now." And he's also not blaming. Meghiya isn't saying, "Oh, that mango grove should have been quieter. The mangoes should have been better, or there should be fewer birds." Meghiya is also not saying, "Well, the instructions that you gave me, venerable sir, weren't good enough," or "Your meditation doesn't work."

He's not doing any of this. Instead, he's saying, "Wow, how incredible. How amazing. This is what's happening."

We could say that his response is some kind of wisdom. He's surprised. He's honest. And he names what has arisen without immediately turning it into an identity.

As the second support, the Buddha is offering this: Notice how what you're doing in your daily life impacts your mind. Notice whether you're showing up with care and how that impacts your mind. Notice how if you're touching into this wish to not cause harm, how that impacts your mind. Notice if you're behaving with ethics. Does your life include some ethical behavior?

Ethics is about beginning to recognize what's actually moving through the mind, and not to condemn it, not to excuse it, but to understand it. When the Buddha talks to Meghiya, he specifically says "a monastic"—remember that Meghiya was saying, "Look, I ordained, I'm a monastic now"—and the Buddha is saying, "A monastic is ethical, restrained in the monastic code, conducting themselves well, resorting for alms in suitable places, and seeing danger in minute faults. Having undertaken the training rules, they train in them."

So maybe the Buddha is saying to Meghiya that it's not so much that you ordained, but that you have to train in the training rules. Some of you will know that for monastics, it's very different than for us householders. For monastics, there are 311 rules for the nuns and slightly fewer for the men.

In this story, ethics is more intimate than just "what we should do." It's about understanding the movements of the mind that lead to suffering: the movement of craving, the movement of ill will, the movement of harshness or cruelty. These movements of the mind are sometimes getting expressed as behaviors that we're showing up in the world with. Ethical practice helps us to become more sensitive to these movements of the mind before they become speech, before they become action, and before they become a way of living.

One way to understand ethical training, or *sīla*[2]—that's the Pali word for it—is that it trains the tendencies that harass the mind. When craving is repeatedly acted out, the craving gets stronger. We know this. When ill will is repeatedly acted out, it becomes stronger. When harshness is repeatedly acted out, it becomes stronger. In modern times, we call this neuroplasticity.

But ethical conduct interrupts this strengthening. Not through repression, not through pretending that these movements aren't happening, and not through condemning ourselves or blaming ourselves, but through learning. We don't have to act in ways that strengthen these unhelpful movements of the mind. We don't have to feed them. We can know these movements of the mind, and we can learn from them without letting them shape our lives.

Getting back to Meghiya, he says that he was being harassed by these thoughts. I just love this word. He's not saying "I am cruel" or "I am malicious." He's saying, "I was harassed by these thoughts of cruelty and these thoughts of maliciousness." This language creates some space. The thoughts are troubling him and pressing on him, but they're not the whole of who he is.

I would say this is a useful way to relate when we find ourselves behaving in a way that's not helpful or skillful. These states can be known. They can be restrained once they're recognized and felt, and they can be understood.

In my view, it's important not to hear ethical behavior as judgment. It's not saying you shouldn't have these thoughts or that you're bad because these types of thoughts are arising, or giving this sense that a good practitioner would be beyond this. The Buddha isn't blaming Meghiya or saying he's a bad person. He's saying, let's pay attention to the conditions that can be a support for your practice to deepen.

Ethical living is asking this question: What leads to suffering? What leads to ease? What supports the mind in becoming steady and clear? That's a very different orientation than "you're bad if you do something."

Behaving ethically is about reducing harm—harm to ourselves and harm to others—in our actions and in our speech. It doesn't require perfection. It requires care.

Some of you will be familiar with the fact that lay practitioners have five precepts. They are: to refrain from harming living beings, to refrain from taking that which is not freely given, to refrain from causing harm with our sexuality, to refrain from false speech, and to refrain from intoxicants that cloud the mind and lead to heedlessness.

These are precepts; they are training rules. They're not commandments, but they are a way to support us and help us in this movement towards greater freedom. They help us notice, "Oh yeah, this action or this movement of the mind further agitates the mind. This action leaves residue. This action supports ease." In this way, we could think of ethics as something very practical. It's part of what allows meditation to deepen.

I also want to honor and recognize that there are lots of different ways in which ethics can be explored, experienced, and taught. Some of you might have taken Gil's courses on ethics; he and I have taught a version of that quite a number of times, both in the university setting and at IMC. This is such a rich place to practice. I'm offering one approach here which I think is really supportive for deepening your practice: to live an ethical life.

For many of us, this ethical practice shows up in ordinary circumstances: conversations with family, co-workers, in emails, and the way that we are being with the irritations of the day. These aren't minor places of practice. This is where practice becomes embodied. This is where practice becomes a part of our daily life. What we're doing off the cushion, of course, has an impact on what we're doing on the cushion.

So as we go through the day today, maybe we don't have to think so much about ethics and precepts, but maybe we can start someplace simpler: Can this moment be met with care? Can I speak with care? Can I act with care?

Care is not the same as being nice. Sometimes care is saying no. Sometimes care is speaking honestly. And sometimes care is just simply pausing before reacting. It's not an emphasis so much on "Are you following the rules?", but rather, "What would care look like here?"

Living with care means being sensitive to our commitment and our wish to not cause harm for ourselves or for others. Living with care means becoming interested in what our actions cultivate and what is fueling them. These are not questions for judging ourselves. These are questions to create the conditions for greater freedom, greater peace, and greater ease in our life.

My wish for you today is that you do experience peace, ease, and freedom. And also, begin to learn to be sensitive to what leads towards more freedom and what leads to less freedom.

Thank you for your practice, and tomorrow we'll talk about one more support that the Buddha offers Meghiya and unpack a little bit more about the interaction between Meghiya and the Buddha. Thank you.

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1. **Meghiya Sutta:** A discourse found in both the Udāna (4.1) and the Aṅguttara Nikāya (9.3), detailing the Buddha's advice to his attendant, Meghiya, on the conditions necessary for the ripening of the mind's liberation. ↩
2. **Sīla:** A Pali word commonly translated as "ethics," "morality," or "virtue." It forms the foundation of Buddhist practice and is one of the three divisions of the Noble Eightfold Path. ↩

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