

Acceptance

Guy Armstrong
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I was reading through some of the old Buddhist texts today, some of the Pali canon that goes back 2500 years, in preparation for the talk this evening. Some of the Buddha's language really strikes me, it has a wonderful ring about it. There's a passage where the Buddha says, "Foremost among footprints is the elephant's." You can tell that the Buddha spent a lot of his life in the forest because so many of his descriptions and analogies make reference to nature, to trees, to the elements, and to the creatures. Times have changed. Today we'd probably say something like, "Foremost among footprints is the Volvo station wagon."

Then the Buddha goes on. "Foremost among footprints is the elephant's. Foremost among reflections is that on impermanence." That awareness of the changing nature of all facets of our experience is always an aid to wisdom, to seeing clearly. But I'm not going to talk about impermanence tonight. I'd like to talk about acceptance. And while I wouldn't want to dispute with the Buddha about the foremost reflection for a student of life, I would say that acceptance ranks right up there with impermanence as a theme that is always suitable in our lives for our consideration, for us to remember and reflect on.

Acceptance is a deceptively simple term. We may hear it and think, "Oh yes, I know what that means," and not give it a second thought. But as we practice over the years and look into our experience more and more deeply, we see that acceptance is a quality that is capable of almost infinite levels of development. It's a word that is really a pointer to the heart of the Dharma, the heart and depth of the Buddha's teachings. This evening I'd like to talk about both the broader, more general meanings of acceptance, and then to narrow the topic down and talk about acceptance as the heart of the Buddha's teachings.

I generally think of three different areas of acceptance to consider: the acceptance of ourselves, the acceptance of others, and the acceptance of life itself. I'll begin by talking about self-acceptance.

Self-acceptance

Self-acceptance, I feel, is a very appropriate theme for those of us who have been raised in the twentieth century in what passes for Western civilization. I imagine you're all familiar with Gandhi's comment. When he was asked what he thought of Western civilization, he replied, "I think it would be a good idea." I think we've all been damaged by being brought up in this culture, and that damage is reflected in our difficulty in accepting ourselves in both small and large ways. You can see the wide-spread nature of this problem in the popularity of the book *I'm OK, You're OK*, which was one of the first pop psychology books to become a huge best seller. Then there's the popularity of Woody Allen, who seems to be the apostle in our culture of self-doubt. And Groucho Marx expressed this feeling well when he said, "I wouldn't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member."

As I look around the room tonight, I see that most of us are of a similar generation, and I imagine that one of the things we're all dealing with in our own self-acceptance these days is aging. We're all getting older. This has been in my mind for a number of years now. It was some years ago, when I considered myself a young man, when my wife, Sally, and I were visiting Amaravati, a Buddhist monastery in England started by Ajahn Sumedho. We were sitting at the back, just chatting as we watched the monks and nuns take their morning meal. I got up and walked over to talk to someone else, and the person next to my wife leaned over and asked her, "Who was that man?" Sally said, "What man are you talking about?" The person said, "That middle-aged man you were just talking to." I was quite shocked when Sally told me about this, because I was already getting a few gray hairs back then, but I didn't think of myself as middle-aged at all. And I realized, "Well, I'm 35, I guess I could be halfway through, so maybe I am middle-aged." So I had to start to relate to my own aging.

A good friend of mine started to go bald quite young in his life, actually in his 20's. He told me that one of the biggest problems he had with baldness was in washing his face. He said that when he got to his forehead, he didn't know where to stop. These are just a couple of the physical changes we have to deal with in getting older.

On another level, I think there's the whole of our emotional life that we all have to come to terms with. We all carry the whole human package, and that means we have the full range of human emotions. So we have the qualities of happiness, joy, brightness, excitement, and bliss, and we've also got the whole range of difficult emotions to deal with. There's our vulnerability to fear, to shame, our tendencies to anger, guilt, grief, depression, and despair. We all have these feelings within us. Depending on how we were brought up, the degree of love and acceptance we

were given, we grow up with very different attitudes toward that whole range of our emotional life.

It's in this area that I think women have, speaking very generally, a big head start on us men when it comes to meditation. I think most of us were told as boys, in one way or another, "Don't show your feelings, don't be a sissy, don't cry, don't show your weakness." Essentially we were told by adults, "You don't have any emotions, and I don't want to see them." I think it's been difficult for us as men to reconnect on that emotional level, to be able to let those emotions flow, and to feel good about them. Whereas girls are usually allowed to be much more natural in their relation to their emotions. That translates in meditative terms to many women coming to the practice with a much greater degree of fluency with the emotional life. It makes it easier for their minds to settle because they're not in such conflict about that whole layer of our human life.

I still find myself coming upon bits and pieces of my emotional life that I'm not comfortable with feeling. I was on a personal retreat last fall, staying in a tiny cabin on 115 acres of farmland in upstate New York. I had very little contact with other people. A friend would come by once a week to take my requests for food, and then bring the food a few days later. Otherwise I was on my own for two months. I enjoyed most of my time there, but after a month the weather turned stormy. I hardly saw the sun for two weeks, it became very cold, I couldn't do walking meditation outside because of the snow, and I started to feel lonely. All of a sudden I started to have doubts about what I was doing there. I started thinking, "This is really difficult. This is no fun at all. I could have a much better time at home. The weather's better in California, I could be around friends, I could be playing tennis now."

I started to look into this quality of doubt. It's one of the classical hindrances in Buddhism, so I thought I should know something about it. As I looked more closely, I realized that just before I had the impulse to leave the retreat, I was getting hit with a feeling that I wasn't used to and that I didn't like. The situation in the cabin with the winter weather and the isolation was bringing me in touch with a kind of despair and emptiness that I wasn't comfortable with. And what was interesting was that I hadn't even been aware that I wasn't comfortable with it. As soon as it arose, my first impulse was to push it away and then to get out of there. The reaction came so quickly! When I began to understand it, the doubt lost its power. Then I was just back with the despair, which I suppose was progress.

So in learning to accept ourselves on the emotional level, we need to bring a subtlety of attention, a subtlety of mind, to that area so that we can feel the difficult emotions when they come

and before we make the movement to push them away or get involved in something else as an escape. If I had felt that despair in my daily life, it probably would have been a passing blip and quickly moved off the radar screen. Because I was in that solitary situation, I had to come to terms with it, but even then it took me days before I recognized what was going on.

I think we've all grown up in a society that is somewhat fragmented, and as a result we're somewhat fragmented too. I was browsing in a bookstore recently and came upon a quote from D. H. Lawrence, who's one of my favorite novelists. I was too cheap to buy the book, so at this point I'm reduced to paraphrasing what I remember his saying. So making some allowance for my faulty memory, I think this is the gist of what he said.

He was writing about how the American character - and obviously he was talking about European Americans - had been formed by the migration westward across the continent. He said, and I paraphrase:

Americans in their movement westward were profoundly affected by the size and openness of the landscape. While in settling it they "broke" the land, something in them was also broken by its vastness and its emptiness. American men lost their warmth, their affection for one another, and now live isolated and lonely, with no real sense of community.

Lawrence made that comment back in 1920, and I think there's a very perceptive, almost prescient, awareness at work in his observation.

So we've grown up in a fragmented society and we've departed from a wholeness that perhaps should be our birthright. Without a true and deep inner self-acceptance, our lives can become very tangled and complicated. The web of our emotions starts to get knotted when we try to accept some parts of it and not accept others. When we say, these emotions are OK but I won't have any of these, that act of repression starts to tangle the web and it leads to some deep splits in us. If we can't fully accept ourselves, there becomes a division between what we could call the "judger" on the one hand and the "doer" on the other. So we're always evaluating our actions and our moods to see if they're OK or not. The split makes us unable to relax with ourselves. We can't come to a true sense of rest and peacefulness because we're always looking to see if we come up to some standard.

When we don't feel complete inside, we're always looking for something outside. I want you to approve of me, I want you to like me, I want you to accept me, I want you to love me, if I'm not able to accept myself. But having put that authority outside, we can't accept the approval or

believe in it when it comes. The world is sending us messages all the time of affection and caring and love, and if we believe that we're not acceptable or lovable, then we block those messages out. Rather than change our world-view, we'll deny our perception and believe that nobody is saying that they like us.

In our personal relationships the lack of self-acceptance often leads to dependency, because we feel so lonely in the rest of our lives and so cut off from others. It also leads to jealousy. How could we let our partner go out into the world and meet other people who are so lovable - because the rest of the world seems so lovable, and I alone suffer from this difficulty. So we can't leave our partner free to interact.

We can't be genuine with other people because they'll see "who we really are." That is, we think they'll see this same negative self-image that we see. But that self-image is not true, it has no final validity in reality. So there's a constant sense of strain, of pretending to be something other than what we are. Every time we meet a new person there may be a fear that we'll be exposed. If we're not able to be genuine, then there's a fear that someone will see through the mask to who we think we really are. Then we become overly sensitive to criticism and feel as though we ourselves are on the line with every action.

Often out of a lack of inner wholeness or self-worth we become overly preoccupied with the outer signs and symbols: with physical appearance and attractiveness, with clothing, with wealth, with status, with power, with the latest car or the biggest home, or whatever. It can be so refreshing to meet people who are completely disconnected from that value system. It doesn't happen often because the influence of the media is so pervasive today. But some years ago I was hitchhiking through Orange County, and I got a ride from a young couple in their 20's who were clearly not into the whole value system of money and appearance and possessions. They were driving an old Ford Falcon convertible that could barely make it up the freeway on-ramp. They were dressed in sort of a country style, denim overalls and flannel shirts before they were fashionable. They didn't seem terribly sophisticated, and I had the impression that they probably hadn't been the leaders of any social cliques in their high schools. They were very down-to-earth and unpretentious. And they had a real happiness about them, they were both very jolly people. So there we were, cruising down I-5 about 50 miles an hour with the top down, chatting about where they had lived and where I had come from, and there just didn't seem to be any flavor of ambition in them. It was as though they'd simply dropped the whole game of comparing and

competing. They were just happy being who they were, and they didn't care how they fit into the media standards. In that there was a real beauty about them.

Through meditation we can come to look into this factor of self-acceptance. Where there's a difficulty in accepting a part of ourselves, we can investigate that through meditation. We can come to terms with it, we can come to an acceptance of those seemingly difficult parts of ourselves. Self-acceptance really means nothing more than being willing to be with our experience moment after moment after moment. It's not that there's some big, eternal, abiding entity that is you or I that we have to discover and then put our arms around. It's much simpler than that. We just need to accept our experience as it unfolds moment after moment. So when a moment of happiness is there, we're at peace with that. When a moment of fear is there, we're at peace with that. When a moment of sadness comes, we're at peace with that.

Through this moment-to-moment work of sitting meditation, awareness throughout the day, and attention to our emotional life, we find that there's nothing in our whole emotional world that we have to throw out. In this way the mind can settle within itself. It can settle back into its original wholeness by removing that layer of conflict, doubt, rejection. A key factor in the mind's original wholeness is what is called *samadhi*, which is one of the qualities in the Eightfold Path described by the Buddha. Usually translated "concentration," *samadhi* is a natural state of oneness of mind wherein the mind can rest within itself. This quality of mind carries with it a sense of well-being, of harmony, of ease. As the meditation stabilizes, that quality starts to pervade our emotional life. The sense of well-being wears away these doubts and conflicts, the lack of self-acceptance that we may have struggled with for a long time.

One other thing that can be useful in this process of self-acceptance is service. Sometimes we find in doing service work that our heart really opens to the suffering of another. We may even discover that we're quite fortunate in our own circumstances when we encounter the degree of pain and difficulty that others are working with in this life. Service can be a way of coming out of our self-absorption, giving to others and opening our heart to others.

The Buddhist perspective on acceptance

Now I'd like to talk a little more about what I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, and that is how acceptance points to the heart of the Buddha's teachings and why it's such a profound concept. When I was a monk in Thailand, I went out every morning on what's called an "alms round" to collect the food for our main meal of the day. We'd go out at about 6 in the morning,

and at the monastery where I was staying in the south of Thailand, the path would take us through fields of growing rice to the houses of farmers which were situated right in the middle of the rice fields. We'd be walking across the dikes just as the sun was coming up and streaming through the green stalks of the new summer planting. It was very beautiful.

I walked this path each day with another monk, a friend named Visuddha Cara. We were starting off on our route one morning, when Visuddha stopped in his tracks, turned to me and said, "Guy, the ego is just friction!" Then he turned around and walked on. I had lots of time to contemplate this pearl of wisdom because we walked for about the next hour and a half in silence. And I came to see that what Visuddha Cara had said was in fact quite a profound utterance. You may be interested to know that Visuddha Cara is no longer a monk either. His name is Rodney Smith and he's a dharma teacher in Seattle.

"The ego is just friction." Here what we mean by "ego" is the sense of "I," the sense of ourselves as a separate entity. The Buddha encouraged us to look deeply into this sense of self and see if there is actually any reality to it. We all carry this sense of "I" but it's usually vague and ill-defined. When we look for the "I", we can't quite find it.

This self expresses itself through constant movements of mind, through wanting and fearing and striving and trying to attain - trying to manipulate our external situation and other people and the environment, trying to make things just right for itself. In engaging in this constant movement, we resist what is in this moment. I don't know if you've ever had this experience. You find yourself in a beautiful spot in nature, in the mountains or by the ocean. And you find your thoughts going on and on about some situation at work or in your home life, with your children or with your partner. You're completely oblivious to the beauty around you, just lost in these thoughts. Then at some point you wake up, and you realize, "I don't have to think about this now!" And all of a sudden you're aware of the flight of a bird, or the sound of the waves, or the way the setting sun falls upon a mountain peak. You realize there's an entire life in that moment, life expressing itself in the creation of that moment, that you hadn't tuned into because of this layer of self-concern. As we let go of this friction of self-concern, the constant restlessness of self-interest, we open to the broader picture, the whole scope of life.

We can inquire, "Where does this resistance come from? Why can't we always be in this state of openness and acceptance?" In looking into this movement of wanting, of striving, we come to see that this is exactly the Second Noble Truth that the Buddha talked about. The First Noble Truth is the truth of suffering, of unsatisfactoriness, in life. The Second Noble Truth is that the

cause of that suffering is wanting, or craving. We start to see that this constant movement in us of wanting is what prevents us from accepting each moment just as it is, from finding peace in every moment.

The Buddha's first discourse after his liberation was on the Four Noble Truths. The second talk that he gave is called the Fire Sermon. It begins like this: "O bhikkhus, everything is burning. And what is the everything that is burning? The eye is burning, visible shapes are burning, eye consciousness is burning. The ear is burning, sounds are burning, auditory consciousness is burning." And so forth through each of the six senses. "Burning with what? Burning with the fire of craving, burning with the fire of hatred, burning with the fire of confusion." The Buddha's teaching was about finding the place of coolness in life, the state that he called nirvana, the end of wanting. Nirvana is often referred to as a state of extinction, and by that is meant the extinction of this restless movement of craving, of resistance.

In our meditation we start to find that place of stillness, that place of complete acceptance. We might call it a *radical acceptance*, because in it we've stopped trying to shape or mold our inner experience to any degree whatsoever. To *any* degree whatsoever. In that radical acceptance there is a deep, deep stillness that is extremely refreshing. That stillness, by itself, as we allow ourselves to rest in it, starts to undo our conditioning - the conditioning of our upbringing, the fragmentation of our society, the legacy of our parents and their parents before them, as well as this ages-old tendency to wanting that has been with us from beginningless time.

Every spiritual tradition has a name for this process. In vipassana we can call it "acceptance." If I were a Hindu bhakti, I might be talking to you about "surrender." If I were a Christian I might talk about "dying to the small life and being reborn to the eternal life." If I were a Taoist I'd probably talk about "non-interfering." These are all descriptions of the same process, which is being willing to open to this moment just as it is, not needing to add anything, not needing to take anything away. Not needing to change it.

There was a wonderful Indian teacher, who died about 10 years ago, named Nisargadatta Maharaj. He lived in Bombay and taught through the medium of dialogue. He didn't give long talks but just worked with people as they brought questions to him. In talking with one Westerner he said this: "The essence of pleasure is acceptance. Whatever may be the situation, if it is acceptable, it is pleasant. If it is not acceptable, it is painful." The questioner replied, "Pain is not acceptable." Maharaj: "Why not? Did you ever try? Do try and you will find in pain a joy which pleasure cannot yield, for the simple reason that acceptance of pain takes you much deeper than

pleasure does. The personal self by its very nature is constantly pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. The ending of this pattern is the ending of the self. The ending of the self with its desires and fears enables you to return to your real nature, the source of all happiness and peace.” [*I Am That*, Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, Chetana Press, Bombay, 1978, vol. 2, p. 18]

As we come to accept our own pain, as we come to feel it day by day, as we allow ourselves to feel an open heart in contact with our own sorrows, then we also start to connect with other people on a different level. We start to be open to the pain that we can sense in another. Because we no longer have to avoid our own pain, we also no longer have to avoid others' pain. This experience opens us up to a different dimension of relating to the world, one where we can much more easily make a heart connection with the people we meet.

Of course we have to use common sense in practicing acceptance. Our standard may be the old proverb, “God grant me the courage to change what I can, the patience to accept what I can't, and the wisdom to know the difference.” In situations where harm is being done to oneself or to another, by all means we need to take action to stop that harming. But in situations where our own mind states are causing us pain or where there is unavoidable pain in our life, then acceptance is a powerful practice.

The acceptance of life

As I was reflecting on acceptance, I realized that it is becoming a common enough topic that Hollywood is starting to pick it up. I thought about three mainstream movies I've seen in the past year that, for me, all revolve around this theme of acceptance in life. The first is *Groundhog Day*, where Bill Murray finds himself in a situation where the same day keeps repeating itself over and over and over. He can't get past that day no matter what he does. After going through the day two or three times, he knows what's going to happen next and he starts to manipulate the situation to get exactly what he wants from it. Unfortunately - or in fact, fortunately - none of his tactics works because he keeps waking up in this same day again and again. At some point, after great frustration and despair and an attempt at suicide, he gives up.

This is the turning point. He just gives up. He's exhausted all his options and he just quits trying. When he stops trying to manipulate the situation and just surrenders to it, everything changes. He stops struggling, his heart opens to other people, and he finds genuine love for the first time in his life. The parable in Buddhist terms is that he's been imprisoned in samsara, the endless cycle of birth and death, in that one day over and over. As soon as he wakes up and

accepts the cycle of birth and death just as it is, he steps out of it. He's no longer in conflict with life, with the way things are. He becomes free, and in that freedom there's the spontaneous flowering of compassion and love. It's really a beautiful dharma parable.

There's another quality to the acceptance of life that I always like to keep in mind. There's an old Chinese story about a farmer named Wong living in the middle ages when China was dominated by feudal warlords. The farmer's horse was very valuable to him- he needed the horse to plow the fields, to take his goods to market, to buy supplies, and to get around. The horse was probably his most valuable possession. Then one day the horse ran away. Wong's neighbors were all very sorry for him. "Oh, poor Wong," they said. "His horse ran away." They'd go up, clap him on the shoulder, "Poor fellow, you've lost your horse. This is certainly bad fortune for you." But Wong did not seem to share their sense of pity. He seemed rather equanimous about his loss and just replied, "Maybe yes, maybe no. Life is uncertain. Who can say what life brings?"

After a few days the horse came back. In fact it had found a few friends out there and came back with some wild stallions. So now Farmer Wong had five horses instead of one. And all the other villagers came by and exclaimed over his good luck. "You're a very lucky fellow, Wong! This is surely very good fortune for you!" And again Wong himself was somewhat non-committal. "Maybe yes, maybe no. Life is uncertain. Who can say what life brings?"

In order to use these wild stallions for farming, they first had to be broken in. Wong's son started to train them, but he fell off one of the stallions and broke his leg. Now the son couldn't work in the fields, and harvest time was approaching. The neighbors came back. "Oh poor fellow, how will you ever gather your crops without the help of your son? This is surely very bad fortune for you." And of course Wong just said, "Maybe yes, maybe no. Life is uncertain. Who can say what life brings?"

A few days later, the army of the local warlord came through the village recruiting all the able-bodied young men to go away and fight a neighboring warlord in the next district. The army took all the young men from the village except for one, and that was Wong's son because he had a broken leg. I think you know how the story goes from here.

We may want things from the world, we may want some things very badly. We'll do everything in our power to manipulate the situation to make those things happen. Sometimes it just doesn't work out for us, and we're disconsolate. We can't be consoled for the loss of that

goal, for not getting what we want. But as the Rolling Stones said, sometimes we just might find that we get what we need.

A few years ago I was looking for a job. My wife and I had just moved back to the States after living in England for five years. Sally had taken a job with Spirit Rock, and I was looking for something in the computer field that would let us live here in Woodacre. I was finally able, after much manipulation and exertion of will, to arrange an interview at Autodesk, a progressive software developer in Sausalito. Their offices were right on the waterfront and there was a tennis court a stone's throw away. I just knew it was meant to be. But I didn't know the interview game very well at that time, and I was naive enough in the interview to tell the whole truth. I was applying for a job in telephone support, and I told them that what I really wanted was a job where I would have face-to-face contact with customers.

I was turned down for that job and I was very disappointed. I thought we would probably have to leave Woodacre and move to Silicon Valley. Then a week later I got an interview and then a job offer with Microsoft, which I accepted. The Microsoft job turned out to be exactly what I wanted. It gave me face-to-face customer contact, it gave me lots of opportunity for career development over the next five years, and it was financially much more rewarding than the Autodesk job would have been. And I remember now, when I'm not getting what I want, how the Autodesk situation turned out. We don't know what's best for us. We really don't! We act from a place of assumption, of thinking we know what's best, almost all the time. In that there's a kind of unexamined arrogance. But if we just remember to throw in that question mark - "Maybe this isn't the best thing for me" - we can feel that such a burden has been lifted.

This work of acceptance sometimes pushes us to our outer limits. How much can we accept? Another recent movie is *Forrest Gump*. I'm sure you know the tag line: "Life is like a box of chocolates - you never know what you're gonna get." And it's true. Sometimes it's a piece of chocolate. Sometimes it's a piece of something a lot less pleasant. Sometimes we're called upon to accept the unthinkable. Part of the charm of the character of Forrest Gump is in the way he maintains his innocence through his acceptance of profound experiences of personal loss.

I don't know how often you think about your own death. I reflect on mine fairly often - at least a few times a week. When I turn my mind to dying, the actual fact of my death seems almost unthinkable, unimaginable. I'm in the midst of my daily activities, my daily momentum, and I realize that I could die tomorrow. Often it's almost impossible for me to imagine that. Yet that's a very real possibility for any of us. And what would that feel like? How would we feel if we

found that we were going to die tomorrow, or next week, or next month? There are people like us facing that issue every single day - people whose lives are turned upside down by one visit to their doctor.

I want to talk more about facing death, but before I do, I'd like to read one more quotation from the Buddha that talks about our mental attitude in the face of adversity. We usually think that if the world doesn't treat us fairly, we have a right to be angry. Don't we? This is a statement from the Buddha that challenges that assumption. This is from a discourse called the Simile of the Saw.

Even if bandits were to [meet you and] savagely sever you limb from limb with a two-handed saw, he or she who entertained hate in his or her heart on that account would not be one who carried out my teaching. Now this is how you should train: "... we shall abide compassionate for the welfare of all ... with an abundant, exalted mind of loving-kindness, without hostility or ill-will, extending over the all-encompassing world."
[Majjima Nikaya 21, trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli, *The Buddha's Words*, vol. 2 p. 13]

It's a high standard, isn't it? Bandits are cutting your limbs off and you feel loving kindness for them? I sometimes get annoyed when someone cuts me off on the freeway. This sort of puts things into perspective. Now this is not to say that we stand idly by and invite bandits to saw off our limbs in the name of acceptance. Common sense says that we do whatever we can to avoid injury to ourselves or to others. The Buddha's point is that once the injury has happened, is there any real justification for a response of anger? It's the inner reaction that is being questioned here, not an outer action of safeguarding which may be highly appropriate.

The third Hollywood movie I wanted to mention is *My Life*, starring Michael Keaton and Nicole Kidman. Keaton plays a man who finds that he's terminally ill. The entire movie is about his process and his family's process in coming to terms with his death. Through the acceptance of his dying, Keaton finds a depth of forgiveness and an openness of heart that he had never imagined possible. It was a surprisingly touching film.

I'd like to read from a couple of recent works by people who have faced death. The first is from a book called *Grace and Grit* by Ken Wilber, who is one of the foremost writers in the field of transpersonal psychology. Ken married a woman named Treya Killam, and a week after the wedding, Treya was diagnosed with breast cancer. They spent their honeymoon in the hospital. The book describes Treya's illness and death over a five-year period and combines Ken's account of that time with excerpts from Treya's journal. This quotation is from Treya's journal.

Learning to make friends with cancer, learning to make friends with the possibility of an early and perhaps painful death, has taught me a great deal about making friends with myself, as I am, and a great deal about making friends with life, as it is. I know that there are a lot of things I can't change. I can't force life to make sense, or to be fair. This growing acceptance of life as it is, with all the sorrow, the pain, the suffering, and the tragedy, has brought me a kind of peace. I find that I feel ever more connected with all beings who suffer, in a really genuine way. I find a more open sense of compassion. And I find an ever steadier desire to help, in whatever way I can. For this I'm thankful. Because I can no longer ignore death, I pay more attention to life. [*Grace and Grit*, Ken Wilber, Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1991, p. 360]

Another book that I wanted to mention is called *In the Lap of the Buddha* by Gavin Harrison. Gavin is a friend and fellow dharma teacher who grew up in South Africa. He was sexually abused as a child and in adolescence discovered that he was gay. A few years ago Gavin was diagnosed HIV positive and his health now goes up and down with some pretty wide swings. Gavin has certainly had his share of difficulties to accept in this life, and part of the beauty of his book is that he's very open about how he's worked with these areas of his life. This passage describes a time in a three-month meditation retreat after Gavin had been diagnosed HIV positive.

Early one morning I was standing under a tree. The leaves were very beautiful in their fall colors. As the sun came up and touched the top of the tree, a multitude of leaves dropped down upon me. Something within me broke and I began crying. I cried and cried and cried. Initially it was for my father. Then I wept for my own lot. This was a terrible grieving for what I felt was the loss of my future. I felt almost betrayed. Then it changed into a deep sadness. There was no part of me that assumed I would be around even to see the next leaf fall from the branches above my head and land on the ground at my feet. Everything appeared fragile and uncertain. At times I felt the deepest gratitude for the fact that I knew I was going to die one day. Around Thanksgiving, when the snow came, my mind started to quiet down. I began to experience a peace and a calm that I had never known before. I saw that it was possible to be balanced and OK with the sadness, fear, and pain, and accept these as wholeheartedly as I did the rapture and happiness that were there also. This was a time of great appreciation and gratitude. [*In the Lap of the Buddha*, Gavin Harrison, Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1994, p. 84]

As we draw to a close tonight, I wanted to reflect for a minute on some of the issues facing us as humans. We don't seem to have a lot of choice about some of the most important factors in our lives, like the body that we're born with and the health that that body lives over the course of its life; our basic personality makeup; the parents we were born to and the love we received, or didn't receive, as children; our happiness when we come into adulthood, or our confusion. We don't

have much choice about these most important areas of our lives. Our choices seem to be in the little things, like how kind we are to one another. How considerate we may be in our relationship to everyone we meet. How much value we place on the qualities of love and compassion in our life and what we do to support that and develop that. The quality of care and attention we bring to each moment of our experience.

But you know, it's just these little things that start to make all the difference. It's these little things that start to wear away at the ages-old suffering that we may not have chosen for ourselves, that we have no conscious memory of having created. The trust in this kind of action, the trust in the openness to each moment, starts to cut through. It's like a river wearing away at the rock that was our heart when it was closed. This steady river wears through that rock and we start to put our whole house in order, from each little action, moment after moment, that is based in care and kindness. As we put our house in order, that becomes a solid foundation for our happiness. Then we discover that happiness actually can come under our control. We find ways to stabilize in it, to become sure of contentment. That happiness then becomes the foundation for our spiritual practice, for a new dimension of growth and development, and ultimately for our freedom and liberation.

May all beings come to self-acceptance.

May all beings come to an acceptance of life.

May all beings live with true freedom.