

Appamada: a fundamental orientation

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This [intensive, and in the larger sense, this sangha] is profound and wondrous, but I didn't want this. No / could ever want such a thing. This whole activity is the result of a harmonic convergence between the wheel of dharma, set in motion by the Buddha 2500 years ago, and your deep aspiration for truth and intimacy. No matter how feeble, intermittent, or defective you believe that aspiration may be, somehow we are all profoundly, wholeheartedly here together.

This great activity can never arise in solitary practice, no matter how devout, nor in the bustle of our everyday lives. It is the manifestation of our shared intention through which the full realization of this path is actualized, as the Buddha within each one of you, the dharma that is the teachings of truth at its most immediate and personal, and the sangha as the embodiment of our interdependence and mutual care. No / can even comprehend such activity. We meet in this intimate encounter, and in every moment, new expressions of who we are. Every arising is our consciousness playing with new forms and processes. Yet over and over again we miss it.

Appamada is about not missing out on your own life. It is not about being kind to puppies and old ladies. There is a fierceness in it. It does not expect gratitude or approval, or even a positive effect. Yet it is a responsive function. You can't assume a lack of care because the whole activity looks nothing like "caregiving." So let's take a closer look at what we believe the Buddha meant when he encouraged his followers to fare forward with appamada.

In his talk, Flint gave a wonderful introduction to appamada through the contemporary teachings of Stephen Batchelor and the sutra of the elephant's footprint, which is so large that it can hold the footprint of all the other animals. We were struck by these pieces, which resonated so perfectly with our aspirations for our work. It was just this quality of aliveness in mindful care that so astounded me when I first met Flint, and it continues to touch me with its profound manifestations in the simplest, tiny gestures. Most of you have witnessed countless examples. When we encounter this quality, we are drawn to it.

And, possibly, many other thoughts and feelings come up for you when you hear the meanings of appamada, some of them maybe a bit conflicted. Most of us have had a lifetime of being told what to care about, from our parents, teachers, friends, work, and of course media. the list is endless: clean teeth, good grades, straight posture, our diet, the war in Iraq, our children, the quarterly sales figures, identity theft, our aging parents, swine flu, terrorists, the stock market, health insurance, and on and on.

The spiritual path adds a new layer to our care package: what we should not care about, as well as what we should. So we should care about virtue, salvation, heaven, enlightenment, great teachers, this present moment, compassion, and so on. And we should not care about personal gain, celebrity, money, fame, sports scores, fun, and so on.

We have mixed reactions to these demands and expectations for what we would care about. Some of our reactions may be positive: we feel honored or privileged, responsive, trying to be good, gain attention, or compete in some way. Some reactions are negative: we may feel overwhelmed, burdened, resentful, claustrophobic, depressed, anxious. Some reactions may be fairly neutral: we engage in rationalizing (“you have to take care of your family, right?”), prioritizing (“I can’t care about the genocide in Darfur until I get my mother settled in the nursing home”), dissociating (“what did you say, dear?”), or distractions (“What about those Longhorns?”).

When we hear about something like appamada, we may feel that we are being asked, again, to care in this way. Yet we are not talking about this sense of care, as something we do, say, or think toward something, someone, or some situation. There is a difference between taking care of and taking care with. Taking care with does not reflect me, an object (such as another person), and something I’m doing to or for that object. We take care with our whole body and mind, taking care with an unfolding situation, together with everyone else in the situation. We do this in full recognition that there is just this one activity, a full and complete manifestation of the whole cosmos right where we are. And we are wholeheartedly participating within that activity. Even our refusal to play, our turning away or seeking some distractions are still the means of our participation in that activity.

Appamada is not something you do, or even an attitude toward; it is a kind of recalling where you are, and freeing the energy that wants to move through you—giving and receiving that flow of energy and information without hindrance is appamada. We call it something like energetic, mindful care, or active, watchful care to distinguish it from the passive sense of “caring about” something. It may manifest as passionate action or even silent reading. You might also think of it as “attending right here and right now.” This is as good a description of nirvana as you will find, in any circumstance.

And as you begin to notice the nearly invisible web of care that supports and sustains your entire life, the most common response is profound gratitude. Appamada flows through it. Here’s just one example:

Someone has to decide to be a dentist, spend years of study and lab work, plus a great deal of money to establish a practice, needs to be good enough to attract patients, and build up enough of a base so that he or she can be available just for that brief amount of time that you will need a filling. There’s a receptionist, equipment, phones, and insurance to pay for, advertising and web sites to be designed and published, There are annual conventions, and ongoing research in medical journals to keep up with. the dentist probably has to maintain a house, a car, and a family, take vacations, and take care with his or her own physical health, with diet, exercise, and medical care. Retirement and taxes need to be planned for, clothing made and purchased, cell phones and computers managed. Need I go on? You, together *with* your dentist are, you hope, engaged in appamada—energetic, mindful care—of your mouth. You take care of your part of that activity when you brush regularly and follow the dentist’s suggestions, and stay off of skateboards. The dentist takes care with your teeth with skills and knowledge and experience. Yet you also may feel anxious and fearful about this whole activity, you may resent your own teeth when you are in pain, you may dread even the thought of a visit to the dentist. You long for reassurance and

comfort when the reality is—well, whatever it is. Do you see how all of this is one activity, and, given the life you are in, you have complete freedom in how you play it? How do you understand the quality of appamada as that participation that is truly free, completely present, absolutely awake?

Now magnify this one example of your dentist times every person, process, technology, or institution that participates in the activity you call “my life.” In an intensive we intentionally simplify this life so that the great activity of appamada is more apparent: in a fruit salad topped with snipped fresh mint, in the cleaning of bathrooms, in the hospitality of this beautiful setting. We are not talking about something you should take care *of*, nor something you should care *about*. We are talking about that vast, boundless activity we are awakened to: dynamic present moment attention, and its wholehearted expression through this body, heart and mind.

The Buddha said that appamada is the path to the deathless, and that all skillful qualities of mind are rooted in appamada, converge in appamada, and have appamada as the foremost among them. This is precisely the elephant footprint.

Here we are, in this remarkable environment: moon sliver/lotus blossom/Texas spring/ and I can't help thinking about the frogs. Consider the completely present, silent stillness of a frog in repose, entirely awake, entirely at ease, until that moment a fly crosses her field of view. The response is immediate, yet only what is precisely necessary in that moment, then just as immediately, the frog returns to stillness and silence and ease. This is what is meant by “enlightenment is an appropriate response.” The frog takes care with the fly, hit or miss.

The quality of appamada is relational: energetic, mindful care is a relational expression, not an individual approach. Mu Soeng speaks of *relationality* rather than relationship. Why? Because *relationship* is a noun that solidifies and simplifies what can only be experienced as a complex dynamic process, and because it further constructs subjects and objects: me, and what I am related with or to. Me *in relationship with* a partner, a work situation, myself, the environment, and so on.

So soon we have three objects identified: you, me, and the thing called “our relationship,” which can have all the attributes of a person: healthy, unhealthy, conflicted, stormy, calm, anxious, trusting, damaged, and so on. This leads to strange constructions such as, “You don't really care about our relationship, do you?” As if you had a child between you, or a houseplant that is being abused or neglected. Or “I want to talk with you about our relationship,” and so on. Weird. There is no such thing as “a relationship,” there is only *relating*. *Relationality* is a more open term, describing a kind of *potential* or *functioning* aspect: the degree or quality of readiness for intimacy, for connecting. It is a fundamental orientation toward being with, attuning, and responding. It is that orientation toward that is the living embodiment of appamada.

How will that affect your particular life dilemmas and difficulties? Only you can find out. Only you can do the experiment in mutuality and observe what shifts, within you and around you, when you take up the Buddha's invitation and encouragement to fare forward with appamada. You have the support and care of your teachers and the sangha. What will you discover?