

## Insight and Identity

### A Dialogue with Rev. angel Kyodo Williams and Acharya Dan Hesse

[0:00:08.9] Acharya Hesse: So I'm delighted to be here with Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams, who is an author a teacher and an activist and author of *Radical Dharma*, her newest book, and she's a Zen priest and she also is very involved with transformative social change and bringing together practice interfaces with social justice, and I think that's a very important and exciting topic for all of us who are embedded in this society of ours and who are also practitioners, so welcome Angel, Reverend Angel, it's an honour to be here with you.

[0:00:58.1] Rev. Angel: Thank you so much and it's an honour to be here and especially be able to have this time with you, it's really lovely, thank you.

[0:01:09.4] Acharya Hesse: So one of the things it says on your website, I've been doing some research, is that without inner change there can be no outer change and for all of us who are meditators, we meet ourselves in a new way when we practice mindfulness meditation or especially insight meditation and that echoes into our world and I wonder how you would talk about your experience of inner practice ringing in the bigger world and how we embed it in our world.

[0:01:44.9] Rev. Angel: You know, there is a video, a little short video I did and it's animated and basically it tells the story of this notion of inner change, and what it comes down to and you have to go get to see the video, but what it comes down to is that really it is our inner selves, it is our internal sense of ourselves that's actually driving the vehicle, so to speak, down the road of life, which is the reason that we come to understand that we have this recurring experience of leaving roadkill behind and not understanding why. We feel in our physical form that we have control but really the whole layer of our inner life, the coming together of all of our experience, our history, our emotions, from past, present and our projections into the future, <inaudible 0:03:02.6> inner life being is actually what's driving us, literally moving us through the world, giving rise to our motivations and what for many of us is the cause of apparent conflict between our intentions and our actual actions.

[0:03:24.1] Acharya Hesse: So if I'm hearing you correctly, it's almost as if we have a sort of a persona or a constructive reality that we're living out you could say, that we're not very aware of, and we keep wondering why this thought keeps happening to us. So how does meditation practice help us either discover that inner narrative or deconstruct that inner narrative?

[0:03:58.1] Rev. Angel: Yeah, I think that for me what meditation practice does, is it gives you an opportunity to see the gap between the story that plays out once you quiet down the activity and you're able to be relatively still and to observe the recurring themes and feel the recurring emotions, the ongoing story, the plotline that plays out, while the projection, that we usually relate to is just sitting there minding it's business seemingly, and yet there's an entire world or in some of our cases worlds of story lines that are continuing to go on with no clear input and so we get to this moment of going oh, this like keeps going on regardless of the fact that I don't have any additional input, I've got this story and it just keeps going and it seems to have enough fuel or it's got enough battery in its pack to just keep going on and on regardless of what's actually happening with my external being. So I think that opens up a window for us, a gap of reality really, our reality is disrupted in the sense that we entirely are operating only in the projected external ego. It gets disrupted, and we realise that we actually are living at least two lives at once, and that the inner life is actually much more potent in terms of its impact on how we show up and behave in our exterior life or our external life than we previously imagined.

[0:05:58.3] Acharya Hessey: That's interesting, it's almost as if we have this projector in like a movie theatre and you go into the room where the projection's happening and there's no-one running the projector, like I'm going.

[0:06:13.9] Rev. Angel: He's going, yes, and you find that when you're in motion then you take on the behaviours of the inner story.

[0:06:25.1] Acharya Hessey: So you're identifying with an inner story, so that kind of, when there's a break in that identification, generally speaking we experience that as fear or pain or anxiety, like my story's not working, but in meditation we have a different opportunity and...

[0:06:42.8] Rev. Angel: What it is, the big opportunity in meditation is first of all just to recognise that and to be kind, a little bit more kind with ourselves, I think that is a very very potent and generative moment of compassion for the ways in which we experience disconnect because we come into contact with the more quiet, more subtle inner life and the difference that we experience in terms of how we're kind of running that projected sense of self and we attach a lot of our sense of accomplishment possibility, what's really our understanding of our reality on that outside external self, and when we come into relationship with oh there's actually something else that's going on inside of here, and that story, good, bad indifferent, we're not really judging the story, but it has its own vitality and it has its own life force, we can be a little bit more kind to ourselves in terms of the ways in which we don't always live up to the hopes that we have for how we show up in the world, realising that there's another aspect of ourselves, the inner life, that we haven't been including. So I think that that's one of the most potent things, is that we have the generative seed for self-compassion.

[0:08:14.7] Acharya Hessey: So that's a powerful way of thinking about meditation to me, I mean a lot of times people think about meditation as a way of sort of optimising their attention so they're better at their regular movie, I will be really good at my movie by meditating, but this is you said a generative seed of compassion, so that's a very personal sort of, for me anyway, very sort of personal discovery. And it's a very sort of, it almost works... Can you tell a little bit about when you first started noticing that possibility what that was like for you as a meditator and as a person?

[0:08:54.4] Rev. Angel: Yeah, I mean I think there's lots of ways... there's a time at which I noticed it and there's a time at which there was like the aha, so for me it's like oh I noticed this is happening and that's great and it's kind of cool and then you're sort of anthropologically interested in the fact that there's these multiple worlds going on, but then the big aha is the recognition of its impact on your life, when you can begin to put together, for me it was putting together the distinction between for instance in my case the desire to be more intimate with people in my life, loved ones and even family and the recognition that in fact I had an underlying story that was playing out about my worthiness and a kind of fear of getting next to people and what that would mean in terms of the betrayal and seeing that that story would continuously play, that once I got still it would come up that the emotions associated would come up, helped me to say oh, now I can be a little less rigid about the fact that I didn't accomplish intimacy in a way that I wanted to accomplish it. I didn't show up at that family function, I couldn't make myself just be fully relatable as I would've liked to be, because actually there was a wounded part of me that had a story that was going and that story, unrecognised, unintended to, unwitnessed was...

[0:10:36.9] Acharya Hessey: Unrecognised, unintended, unwitnessed, very powerful.

[0:10:41.5] Rev. Angel: Yes, and it therefore continues to play, right, it's that projection screen, there's no-one running the projector because no-one's watching the movie, there's a potency to

witnessing and being in self-witness of the places in our lives where we have not felt met, where we have felt untended to, where we have felt unwitnessed. And the potency of witnessing that through a practice like meditation, not just when things are completely crashing down in the moment and the momentum, but when we have the relative, I want to say relative safety of wellness and some kind of perspective that actually the harm, right, the content of the story is not actually playing out right here, and yet I'm still having the emotions, and we have the opportunity to say, oh, maybe I can actually let that feeling in, rather than being fearful and pushing the emotion aside or the feeling aside because we're concerned about what that will mean to our boss, that's looking on us at that very moment, that accidentally triggers something that happened with our father twenty years ago, right, and you don't want to do that so you push the emotion aside, but we get into the habit of doing that, we live on the external, we miss the internal, and we are living in the kind of disconnect.

[0:12:18.5] Acharya Hessey: So this is a very powerful expansion of the understanding of what meditation is in terms of bravery, to me, when I'm hearing you speak, because a lot of times we think that meditation is a distancing mechanism, so we can watch our thoughts and watch our emotions and come back to our breath like this, but you're talking about meditation as a safer space, that's the way you put it, where you can feel feelings that normally drive you around in circles, but you can actually feel them, that's a very engaged, embodied kind of meditation to me.

[0:12:55.9] Rev. Angel: Yes, I think you know we think of, we use the word distance and I think of it as perspective, we can gain perspective, and that perspective is that the awareness that in the physical world that the experience that conjures up those feelings and emotions is not actually taking place in the physical world and therefore that perspective actually provides the space, I wouldn't say distance the space to entitle us, to give us the permission to allow the emotion to run its course, to actually live and be with us for a moment so we can be with our own emotions, our feelings, and do that in the relative safety of the inner life space that we created on meditative practice.

[0:13:51.8] Acharya Hessey: Now I'm going to ask you a question that I've asked myself for a long time, are those emotions our friends or our enemies? Are they confusion or wisdom?

[0:14:04.2] Rev. Angel: I think that whatever they are, overall I think they're just emotions, they're neutral, they're neither friend nor foe, they always open the doorway to our freedom though.

[0:14:16.0] Acharya Hessey: The doorway to our freedom?

[0:14:17.9] Rev. Angel: They're always the doorway to our freedom. The notion that they have to be friends in order to be the doorway to our freedom is something that we should release, or that they have to be foe, they're simply emotions and they are simple what is, they're neither to be pushed away, right, nor clung to, but born witness to as what is, as in it is an emotion, not it is the reality but it is an emotion and it arises and it falls away. So I think of emotions as simply emotions, and that's what they are and rather than being caught in the emotions I can allow myself to experience emotions for what they are, I just actually read something recently that said if we allow, and it was particularly talking about fear, if we allow ourselves to actually accept our fear for what it is, it has a hold for mostly 30 to 90 seconds at most, and the rest of the feeling we have rounded is anxiety, but we can't actually relate to the difference between the emotions and the anxiety we have about the possibility of our emotions, which is mostly what we're living without that space, right, and assigning friend or foe to it is part of what creates the anxiety, so we have emotions that we cling to, we have emotions that we want to disregard, and we have aversion to, and so this sense of like it's simply neutral, they're just emotions, they're

what arises, and it's great liberation, because they will arise, they will come and go, I'm not interested in putting them... getting rid of them, I'm not interested in clinging to them, but I can allow for the truth of emotions come and go. So I get to go on about my business and my life and I'm not beholden to my emotions and caught up with them, nor am I stuck in a place in which my job feels like I have to distance myself from them and get away.

[0:16:35.0] Acharya Hessey: So does that say when we're thinking about being embodied in our life, we were doing our practice, we've learnt something powerful about our emotions and our resonance with various kinds of triggers, you might say?

[0:16:48.2] Rev. Angel: That's right.

[0:16:49.1] Acharya Hessey: That we're no longer slave to them. That we're, you know they arise, because we're people, but we don't have to take the whole ride every time.

[0:17:01.3] Rev. Angel: That's right.

{0:17:02.2} Acharya Hessey: What about in the sense of social change or being in society where things we experience, do we have that same sense of neither friend nor foe towards what we see in society? Does that same principle go to that next step?

[0:17:20.7] Rev. Angel: I believe it does and it's a fairly, I want to say it's nuance, but though having an inner practice you begin to understand how you can hold both things, and so the presencing of difficult experiences and including systemic oppression, the kinds of killing that we're seeing of you know specifically black men that are being highlighted in the media and social media and whatnot, that is a kind of social emotion that arises, that we can bear witness to. It doesn't mean we disregard any kind of action that we think appropriate to act towards, but if what we do is get so caught up in how terrible and how awful it is, then we're rendered frozen or we're rendered in a state of anger so that we're actually not able to be clear minded in terms of our response. And so the ability that we get, that spaciousness that gets created through and in our life practice is that we can allow yes, this has happened yet again, yeah, there's another shooting.

[0:18:41.5] Acharya Hessey: I've been experiencing this as an old white male guy, you know <inaudible 0:18:47.2> guy and you know repeated stories of innocent, unarmed black men just being killed and then nothing happening about it, I am so frozen, emotionally by it, because on the one hand I don't want to believe that that would happen to someone you know if it happened to me I would go crazy, I would be so shocked, and the other thing I feel so hopeless about how do you gain purpose in this world to actually have deep social change that would undo, what are we four, five hundred years into you know the history of slavery and oppression for people of colour in this country, at the least, you have to be a historian to know, and I literally, I realise emotionally I feel frozen inside and I'm very interested in how that inner work can unfreeze a person so they can become part of the solution rather than part of the frozenness.

[0:19:47.9] Rev. Angel: Yeah, I think it's very much a lot about allowing ourselves to feel the grief that comes from, I want to say there's waves of grief, there's the grief of just the thing itself, and then there's the grief of the recognition that this is the society that you live in, there's the grief of I didn't think that this is what my country is about, there's the grief of I'm just one person, what can I do, clearly this is a bigger issue than going down to the corner and say hey you'd better stop that, so the sheer magnitude of it and the helplessness that we feel in terms of a direct response produce waves of grief and I think allowing ourselves and having a practice that allows us and in which we give ourselves permission to feel all of those waves of grief, the

loss of identity with the ways in which we have imagined our country to be and what we thought our country stood for and what we thought our policing was supposed to be about, the recognition there's a kind of loss of identity that is happening there on multiple levels. The recognition I think that I imagine would be true for many people of I didn't know this was happening, right.

[0:21:24.0] Acharya Hessey: That it is happening, that it's endemic, I couldn't have imagined.

[0:21:26.4] Rev. Angel: Right, and where have I been, right? And I'm sure there's some level of grief slash embarrassment you know guilt, all of that stuff is happening. And the ways in which we may have at some point thought like oh, people are overblowing the situation, it's really not that bad and there's that, as it happens over and over again. Whatever this thing, we come to this recognition of the loss, the sense of loss of our identity, the way in which we thought something would be our loss of fixedness of our reality.

[0:22:05.5] Acharya Hessey: So that's a direct parallel with what you were talking about discovering the inner work, that we're losing a sense of identity, we had identified with ourselves a certain name, a certain gender, a certain pronoun, all of those things that we have like this is the way it is, the movie is real, and I feel that's sadness that you experience when you have an actual experience of that. It's like putting on a pair of glasses, everything is fuzzy and then through those particular tiers you can see more clearly.

[0:22:41.5] Rev. Angel: That's right, yeah. And I think that if we allow ourselves, and this is what is critical, because the practice can be something as you said that becomes a mechanism, a tool for distancing ourselves as well, it's about choosing to have an embodied relationship to our practice and by embodied meaning truly allow it to presence itself in our bodies, to allow the emotion to presence itself in our bodies. To not create a distance that means that it does not touch us, because to be touched is to allow ourselves to be compassionate, to be touched is to allow ourselves to resonate in the field of what is, it's just that we don't have to remain in the field of what was, right, and so we're remaining in the continuous arising and flowing and moving, so that my sense of grief about what's going on in the country, my sense of grief about what's going on in our politics, what it means that so whatever the number is it's a meaningfully significant number of people that are abiding by a kind of rhetoric and a conversation that seems to really upend what many of us thought the country was about, and at the same time for others of us there is a real sense of great loss of what they thought the country was about and what they thought the country represented, we have some pretty strong values that are not bag-values, they are values that people are rightfully deeply connected with and they're upended with things that some of the others think it's good stuff, right, so like what does it mean that a transgender person can come in my bathroom? I lived with values all my life of a separation between the genders and what does it mean that people of the same gender are permitted to get married? And what does that say about what my values have been about the sanctity of marriage as a very very very important aspect of society and how I relate. So we're all experiencing from our different perspective values, our belief, our world view a kind of loss of identity, right, and clashing with others as if those people are responsible for upending our identity. Which is what our practice allows us to do is to recognise that what we're really working with is a fixedness about our identity and about reality and that the tear of that fixedness is what we experience as grief. So I'm not judging it as right and wrong, but rather there is a tear of what I believed to be so and the way that I thought things ought to be and should be and I felt comfortable with, damnit, and that's coming undone, and that's happening in multiple levels, multiple directions, with people with very different world views and it's colliding and so what our practice can enable us to do is to take that collision and recognise the

pain and grief that it brings up for us rather than merely projecting it out externally and looking for someone to blame for the great sense of grief and loss, and when it clears, when it begins to move through, then we can look at that so called other with the fresh eyes of not simply being overwhelmed with who do I blame for this pain and then solutions or resolution or just workability is possible.

[0:26:55.7] Acharya Hessey: Wow, that's an amazing exposition of the heart of the <inaudible 0:27:01.0> path, I was kind of crippled, I'm having feelings.

[0:27:06.7] Rev. Angel: They will come and they will go.

[0:27:09.7] Acharya Hessey: So I hear. So in essence the meditation practice allows us to, and I'm using sort of code words here, peaceful abiding with the broken hearted inner life, so that we don't have to... we understand that the impermanence or the falling apart of our identity is inherent situation.

[0:27:30.6] Rev. Angel: That's right.

[0:27:32.3] Acharya Hessey: And we don't think well some people have an identity that they should hold on to and other people have the wrong identity, and those people with the wrong identity should change to my kind of identity.

[0:27:41.7] Rev. Angel: That's right.

[0:27:42.5] Acharya Hessey: But where does that leave a person, as an embodied broken hearted person, how do you... who are you then?

[0:27:53.3] Rev. Angel: You are the moment, you are what presents itself in the moment, you are, and I love that, you are an embodied broken hearted person because what it means to be human and to be in our bodies is to be broken hearted, and what it means to be human and to be in our bodies is also to be in the recognition of and joy is possible in the presence of that broken heartedness. And in fact our sense of joy and our sense of possibility and wonder at the spirit of human beings and all sorts of beings, all of life, actually gets opened up when we acknowledge that the heartbrokenness is not the exception to the rule but rather it is the non-ground if you will of our being because that is just what is, if we're actually open to life, broken heartedness is where we live and if we stop resisting the broken heartedness then the joy that co-exists with the broken heartedness is actually felt, we can feel into that and we realise they're not one is replacing the other, so I think many of...

[0:29:12.4] Acharya Hessey: Yes, yes, it's not binary.

[0:29:14.3] Rev. Angel: Yeah, once the broken heartedness is over, then there'll be joy, the only joy that's really worthy is the joy in the presence of, in the midst of that broken heartedness.

[0:29:25.0] Acharya Hessey: That's so beautifully said, it's really, it's a wonderful thing to be able to share a broken heart with other people and I wonder, I'd like to invite you to, we have so many eyes, right now it's just the two of us, you're in California and I'm in the mountains of Colorado, and soon there will be many thousands of people who will be sharing this conversation, and I wondered if you would lead us all, those... the two of us in the present and all those folks who will be here in the future, in a brief contemplation of this broken heartedness, this broken hearted awareness.

[0:30:10.0] Rev. Angel: Sure, so the way that I like to start, and regardless of whether you have a Buddhist practice or a Christian practice or a Hindu practice or a Muslim practice, we all have something that we're working with, the way in which we're connecting with the earth, so I

would say feel our feet, as we're <inaudible 0:30:36.0> and feel our seat. And our seat is really the way in which we are seeded in the earth and or if we're standing, if we're standing then we actually still want to connect with our seat as a way in which to feel the depth of our own bodies, and to allow ourselves to actually extend, use our outbreaths to extend and reach our crown towards the sky so we can feel the full length of our integrity and our dignity and also to really draw our shoulders up and out and feel the full width of our body as we extend ourselves into the relationship with the space around us and with the people and the energy that surrounds us. If we're around people we want to feel contact with those people and their presence, and to feel into our depth, that means feeling connection with both our front body but also our back body, the way that we often forget that we're back, that we're really this depth walking beings. And dropping into our core, right beneath our belly we can feel a connection right there with what matters to us in our lives. And in this particular instance, what I want to encourage people to do is to actually, having connected with what it is that matters to you, what it is that motivates you in your life to also invite into your heart, so to bring your hand to your heart, so one hand is on your low belly and one hand is on your heart, and in your heart connect with the areas in your life, pick one in which you recognise that you have a broken heartedness, it could be a kind of loss that's personal, it could be very very personal about your health or wellbeing or the health or wellbeing of a loved one, or you could be feeling a broken heartedness about the way in which our national discourse is unfolding, you could be feeling a broken heartedness and a helplessness about the kind of violence that we see human beings perpetrating against other human beings, and the particularity of pain that comes with seeing that happen along lines of colour, race and gender, class, religion, and as <inaudible 0:33:57.6> brought up, in particular the killings of most especially the shootings of black men that are unarmed, and whether you know these things to be true or not true, the human part of you that may just feel a kind of broken heartedness about a loss of confidence in who we are and how we are conducting ourselves and what that might mean for us, going forward, or where your place is in that. Or that you're in a place in which you are in relationship to people and communities that feel the vital burden of that, physically and mortally with a loss of life, whether you're in a position of people in relationship with communities in which officers are receiving a great deal of negative attention at times, and they're just out there doing their jobs, many a time. Or whether you're in a position of neither one of those things and a kind of helpless observer, or combination of both holding all of those complexities as is true for me, many instances, and to allow the broken heartedness of whatever the conditions of your life are at this moment, to take it in and then to bring that broken heartedness from your heart down to your belly, reconnecting it with what matters in the kind of self-soothing that also grounds us, and allows us to move forward with both the feeling and the heart, and also the awareness that we have aspects of our lives, things that are happening in our lives that we remain committed to and from that commitment we move forward and we seek clarity and we seek the intention, the best intention that we can manifest in our lives, given what we're aware of now and we hope for the awareness to expand and we allow ourselves both that broken heartedness and also the joy of the potential, moving forward and remaining committed to what motivates us in life. And then we rest our hands on our lap and at our sides knowing that in this moment, this is the best we can do. Thank you.