

‘Peace in interpersonal relationships’

interview with Gregory Kramer, long-term meditator and meditation teacher

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1) Is there any advice you can give to young people, young adults and other people (in general) considering the current situation we are in with the war, terrorism and violence in Europe, as well as in the rest of the world?

Gregory Kramer: “Circumstances are never under our control: our political world, our minds, our bodies, the natural world ... This is reflected in the Buddha’s first noble truth: stress, suffering, is part of life.

The question is: how do we respond? When things are not as we would like, we feel unsafe, or concern for others who are not safe, or the world is not fair, or really anything is upsetting us - how does the mind respond? Are there habits of rejection of this thing: of anger, of fear, of agitation? Is there equanimity, compassion, investigation of the circumstances or of our own minds? Is there genuine care for others?

Equanimity and love can be practiced. Awareness, mindfulness, can be practiced. Action to improve things can be engaged with both deep concern and calm.

So meditate regularly. Practice generosity to set the mind in a good direction. Actively cultivate friendliness and compassion. Do good things for people as your circumstances permit. Note when and where the mind grasps at things and see how this feels. Learn what it feels like when grasping is released. Follow that thread.”

2) *How have these teachings been touching your relational life? What has been the benefit for you personally?*

Gregory Kramer: “I’ll speak briefly about my everyday life, then say something brief about my formal practice and Dhamma evolution.

Conditioned tendencies towards selfishness are somewhat diminished. Along with this, I’m more aware of and less dominated by sexist or patriarchal attitudes. My personal relationships as well as those in my meditation world are regularly inclined towards genuine care, generosity, and inner balance. I am more responsive to pain in the world at large, but even when there are tears, such as in response to Syrian immigration or the wars in Sudan, Gaza, Somalia and the Ukraine terror, there is also an inner knowing that this is the course of things, this is suffering. I don’t get thrown off even as I remain awake to how things are.

I am more malleable with my wife, although I’ve always been caring and generous. There are tears of joy with my children and grandchildren, but, as with the refugees and terror, there is still balance and not grasping at things. Likewise with my friends. I feel a genuine care for their well-being that may have grown through just life experience, but relational meditation has, I believe, enhanced my capacity to care.

As to the Buddhist teachings and they evolve in me, there has been a huge shift in my sense of the Buddhist path. Basics remain, such as my respect for tranquility, concentration, and mindfulness. But the sense of an always-present path is pretty much unshakeable. I say this not with pride; after all, I’m an old person now, by most standards, and I’ve been at this for over fifty years. So one would think that the neural networks of Dharma have found a home somewhere inside me. I also do not imply that I am always perfectly mindful or perfectly moral, or perfectly anything. Like many people, I just do my best.

But I easily recollect that awareness is present here and now. I don’t see anything, any moment, that is not a part of this path. I know my many imperfections are just part of my being human and that’s all okay. My sense

of awe and inspiration with the Dharma is strong, and it is not always connected with doctrine. Doctrine can be useful if there is no attachment, and I go back to the discourses, the formal teachings, all the time. But this sense of awe and inspiration is about the natural laws of this very life, whether or not I frame my observations with the teachings.”

3) *Your first book ‘Insight Dialogue, the interpersonal path to freedom’, gives a very good overview of your teachings. What has been the most difficult instruction for you and why? How did that change in your life?*

Gregory Kramer: “First, let me say that the bigger vision of life in the Dharma is offered in my book ‘A Whole Life Path: A layperson’s guide to a Dhamma-infused life.’ It’s not a better book, just one that addresses the entire path. And now, I’m writing about a relational vision of the whole of the Buddha’s teachings, a relational Dharma. So let’s ask about difficulties or inspiration from a viewpoint wider than Insight Dialogue practice (which I still practice, teach, and find inspiring).

Difficulties? There is still self-centered thought and action. There is still some of the pride that comes from existing in this situation that is flooded with privileges that I did not earn but was born into. I still prefer sensory pleasure to pain; my equanimity is imperfect. I could be much more generous.”

4) *A while ago you heard that you had cancer. I was very happy to hear that you are cancer-free again. How has meditation/mindfulness helped you when you were feeling sick? How has it helped you in dealing with the illness (in general) and in dealing with the stress of the people around you, while you were ill?*

Gregory Kramer: “A full answer to this would be very long. But I can say that mindfulness and acceptance of things kept me from residing in hell for those worst years. Energy and inspiration on the Path has kept me recovering and growing stronger. Facing death and the prolonged suffering that came with treatment and disease again - it was two cancers in succession, one with chemotherapy, one with major AND I’ve had a daughter die and a son with stage 4 cancer (he is now very well) - has opened my heart to all who suffer. I do not fear my own death, but importantly, I do not fear being with others who are dying or experiencing deep suffering. I am unspeakably grateful for this.”

Remarks:

- *Insight Dialogue is a scientifically proven methodology. Read this recent peer-reviewed article: [‘Effects of Insight Dialogue Retreats on Mindfulness, Self-Compassion, and Psychological Well-Being \(2023\)’](#).*
- *This interview was taken by MBSR-trainer and psychologist/psychotherapist Marisa Hoslet who is currently working in BRUCC (Brussels University Consultation Center) at the VUB, and who has her own center, the Center for Mindful Living, www.centrumvoormindfulleven.be.*