

# 2009-12-21 Phases of Your Practice

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## SPEAKERS

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That Cosmos changes. There's no real world thing that changes like, you know, it makes sense to have the New Year's, you know, tonight around the solstice that would, you know Mark some some change but there's just a New Year's Eve is a convention that we've made up that marks the changing of the calendar. The change the calendar itself is just a convention and pointed out that you can go around the Bay Area and probably celebrate New Year's Eve every weekend. Because there are so many different cultures and calendars. You can get Chinese New Year's and Thai New Year's and Buddhist New Year's and, you know, goes on and on. And so it's quite something to met all this hoopla around something that doesn't exist except as a convention and conventions are important because can Important, and they can also be a very oppressive. But the important way conventions work is that when people share a convention and they share something in common, and so it brings people together around this common convention, and to New Year's Eve is a convention that we all kind of, most of us have some relationship with. And it's an opportunity to come together to make something happen intentionally. And so, sitting together with people practicing together with people, sharing your values to get during this time, is a wonderful way of coming together to celebrate this convention. And New Year's Eve, we stay up until midnight. And then before that, during the retreat, we we have a period of people who write down some intention of something they want to cultivate for the next year or something they want to let go of. And then we'll chant the refuges and chant the precepts. And then we do this thing with its little ritual with the blessing cord. And then we sit and meditate up until way past midnight, about four minutes or so after midnight. And then we go to bed.

So, yesterday morning here at IMC, I gave a talk on how to evaluate your own practice. And I think that from time to time, it's useful for people to be able to in practicing meditation practice or Buddhist practice or any spiritual practice to have some capacity and ability to turn around and look at themselves doing the practice and evaluate how it's going. And I went through variety of criteria or areas which person might look at, in evaluating their practice. I'm not going to talk about that again today. But because of maybe it's kind of on my mind, it has to do with kind of stepping back and looking at the nature of how practice unfolds for people over time. And again, evaluating it, assessing it, understanding it is a important topic, I think. So this evening, I'd like to take a little different angle at this and, and talk about how meditation practice, Buddhist practice. Perhaps most spiritual practices, goes in as phases to it develops and changes over time. It's not something which is just one thing. You know that generally we don't think I don't think of it as being one thing, such as one practice, do one practice. And that's it just change one way. And that's it. You know, take the short, the short path to that one particular change you're supposed to have, and then live in enlightened retirement after that. But rather, there's a variety of changes that people go through as they engage in spiritual practice. And it's useful, I think, to have some sense of change. And so we can understand how to work with changes and shifts and change your practice according to the phase that we're going through. Just like there are seasons

to the year, this evening, we mark the change of seasons. So there are seasons in a sense in person practice. And I don't think of these various seasons or phases as being something which is set that You're supposed to start to number one first phase and go to second and third and fourth. And just it's kind of a linear kind of set thing. It's much more personal and organic and every person is going to follow their own inner development and growth in a different way than everybody else. And some people do a phase of practice early on in there, that someone else might do much later later on. And some people follow a particular set of phases one after the other, or their people follow it reverse order or follow a different ways in which it goes. And I, you know, the human being is as complicated as the number of relationships you have. How many relationships do you have? No, you see in relationships to your family, your friends, your colleagues, your neighbors, your community, your society, your you know, the nature, the watershed you're in. You have this the people in the stores, the print the people who produce the food and the material and goods that allow you to sustain your life. The people who receive your effluence and take care of all the things, the trash and sewage and everything that happens. There's so many different things in relationship to yourself. And you get a sense of actually, maybe infinite number of relationships that you're involved in. And so Who are you? And one way of answering that question, is that you are is that you find yourself somehow in the relationships that you have and you change with the relationships you're involved in. In some relationships, you're a child, you know the relationships, some people are parents, in some relationships, your friends, some relationships you have, you know, in your friends in different ways your colleagues and all these things makes you a different person in some way. It's very valuable for me when I went to the monitor Zen monastery where we change jobs, but every three months, the turnover was quite high.

Because they, you know, up to about maybe three months, but maybe three times a year, average for four months, maybe where you would be new new period of the monastery life. And we sometimes assign new jobs for that new period. So for maybe three, four months you'd be when I first got the for example, I spent three, four months in general it's called it was called general labor. Kind of just, you know, just did whatever they send you to send you to do anywhere. But what I did was was the primary thing I was assigned to do was sanding meditation platforms. They had these big big rooms like this bigger than this then platform platforms all the way around to the people set up on almost the highest platform there. They had new ones that just been made for the monastery and hadn't been installed yet to need to be sanded. So I have my certificate in Zen training and using an electric sander. I have the virtue of being repetitive. And so over and over again for me in the sand or me in the wood, looking at my mind looking at the wood, trying to have equanimity and patience and presence and concentration and all these wonderful qualities. A lot of wood so for three months, that was my job. And then and then I was dishwasher and then I was gardener and then I was kitchen prep cook and then I was a kitchen manager. And then I was I was after that then I was I remember that I think it was remember what it was up to that. But anyways you and your plumber or your Treasurer or your all these different jobs.

And what was interesting about it is that people often assigned jobs that they didn't know anything about. And so like I didn't know anything about working in the kitchen, I didn't know anything about gardening really I didn't didn't know much when I went there. And there's a lot of things I didn't know much about jobs assigned to and in what I found is in each job that I had, a different aspects of myself were brought out. And I was challenged in different ways. And I got to look at myself in different ways. And so if I had to say had one job for a whole lifetime. But only during the kitchen whole lifetime. Some of the ways in which I was challenged, would have worked for to work through those relatively quickly, maybe or I don't know. And I would have probably kept having challenges, rest of my life, but it would have been narrower and narrower. But by shifting to a whole different job, I was challenged in very different ways. And so it was really wonderful to have all these different challenges. This is a long way of saying that, who we are as a person, or how we see about ourselves. And what we have to deal with

in ourselves can change a lot depending on the relationships we're in the activity we're involved in. And to get a sense of how complex we are, I offer to you the idea that we're as complex as a number of relationships that we're in. And so, you know, even if you have very few friends, we still have a lot A lot of relationships with different aspects of life. And so these different relationships require different parts of ourselves. And so the spiritual life that is meant to be holistic, they've meant to include all of ourselves, has to somehow address all the different relationships are all these different parts of ourselves that go into relationship with the different things.

And as we go through life, there are different phases are different of ways we relate the way the way that you relate when you're you know, 15 is different than when you're 25 is different than when you're 35 different when you're 45. Different when you're 65. The kind of the roles you have the position you have in society and with your people, you know, it all shifts and changes, it also shifts and changes to yourself. So to Also, depending on your life circumstances, you might have to address different issues, then other people might have to address, you might have to address different issues and different times. The when I was a college student, it was the height of the Vietnam War. And so as a young freshman in college, it was basically I needed to I had to confront the issue of the draft. I was draftable. And, and so then I had to grapple with this whole issue of war and violence and being drafted and where I stood with that. And so that part of me, in my view, had to be looked at and worked with. If there had been no war, no draft at that time. Maybe I wouldn't have been shaped or I wouldn't have to face and dealt with these kinds of large issues of war and violence in my relationship to so I point this out that the circumstances of your time, your historical time, might also have a big impact on what you have to face and what you're working with in your spiritual life. And sometimes people we find ourselves in situations where often where it's not our choice, what our spiritual practice is about, but rather it's what circumstances provide us. So, this was very clear with me when, you know, when I when I had kids, and being very aware of parents, new parents, who had children who had a variety of very serious ailments, or injuries or something, so much so that the child who rested the child's life was basically going to be someone to require the care of their parents. They couldn't the parents couldn't look forward to the child growing up to be 1820 and leaving home and then they can be finally free. But rather they look forward to each child wheelchair, some kind of disability that had to be, you know, and so much of the parents energy and effort in the whole life kind of centered around caring for this child, and they had to live a very different life than they ever expected. And so their spiritual practices they had one had to help and support them in this major sacrifice of their major limited life. And if they were going to kind of find their freedom, they had to perhaps address and look at themselves and look with issues that are very different than someone who had no having those has no limitations in their life and can just freely prance off to a monastery and or, you know, go off to Asia and meditate without, with a band and without any concerns about other people. This is very different kind of things they have to address because of that. Some people have childhood legacies that they have to deal with.

A great story I like the story of my colleague and friend John Travis. Who, you know he is he was in practicing in India in the 60s 1960s and wandering Sadhguru and Buddhist practitioner. And at some point, he felt stuck in his practice. And so back Ram Dass was there in India and he knew he was they knew each other. So he went around us and said, You know, I'm stuck. What should I do? And Ram Dass told him Oh, you have to go back to Kentucky to see your father. And you should go more. You should go something on his terms. But don't stay long. And so John Travis went to a tailor in India and got a corduroy suit made and had his long hair cut and no went back to Kentucky and hung out with his father and And he was estranged from work through something there. And then at some point he felt ready to go back to India. So given his family background and how he was raised, there was something very important that he had to do about going back and meeting his father addressing his father doing something there. Again, in my life, I was I, when I was about 20 or 21, I got pretty serious about doing

Zen practice. I'd been introduced to it, I thought it was really something very meaningful for me something I wanted to pursue. So here I thought in the cusp of starting a spiritual discipline in life, and I thought, well, this is a serious thing to do. And there feels like there's some some things in my life which are not that I need to work out first. Before I go do those things to do that is in practice there. myself into it. So I spent three years finishing up. That's silly, right 21 year old, finishing up loose ends, taking care of this unfinished things that I felt needed to be taken care of some issues I had to work through or resolve for myself. And once I kind of worked through those finish those things, those tasks that had to be completed, then I could turn my attention to the Zen practice. And then when I was about 23, or 24, I threw myself into Zen practice, and kind of never looked back I've entered to entered into worldly Buddhism.

The other thing about phases in practice, is that we don't always know what phase we're in until we're finished with it. And you don't necessarily get to choose. So for example, my early Zen period I was kind of all four Wisdom and enlightenment. So, you know, I was huffing and puffing away for that. And, and, you know, I didn't get much as wisdom or enlightenment. But what I got was, what happened was that slowly over time, I developed a lot of an awful lot, but I developed compassion. My sense of my capacity for compassion was awakened, developed. And so but I didn't realize that until afterwards, when I look back at those years of practice, said, Wow, that's what the most one of the most important things that happened for me, and it was a very, very important phase of my practice to open the heart, develop the capacity for compassion for love. And perhaps it was a really essential for me to do that. Because only with that as a foundation, could I take my own personal practice, you know the, the life metric for example, further, because you need to have a fair amount of love Open heartedness or warm heartedness, in order to do some of the deeper work that has to happen with practice. So I kind of had this whole other thing happened to me, without my, you know, recognizing it while it was happening.

Some people come to spiritual practice, especially when people are quite young. And they don't know it know themselves well enough. They haven't had maybe enough life experience. And it's important to actually not stay in the monastery, not stay doing audits intensive practice, but you have to maybe it's important to do some of it, but then they leave and go out into the world and have experiences. So I saw a lot of people come through into Buddhist practices, and do a few years of practice two or three years and just enough practice to kind of some ways stabilize And find themselves and feel connected enough. And then once they found the con themselves enough, then they would go off to college, go to work, start a family do something. And then they would come back, perhaps some of them many years later, and continue after this whole thing of family and work, which was maybe a very important thing for them to do to understand themselves to develop certain capacities, to develop skills, understandings, different kinds of things, so that they could kind of then finally bring a certain maturity to a spiritual practice that they didn't have when they were young. Sometimes there's a phase of practice where most of practice is very personal. And it's very important to go off and be alone. Some people actually find it very, very important to go off and do solitary practice. Some people spend their life so much in relationship that They can't really find themselves unless they stop being always relating. And so they need to be alone to do that than to really spend some internal time. And it can look very self absorbing very quickly, but you know, even selfish to people outside. But they really need to deal with deal with something inside first.

And then it changes and then there's a phase of practice where people feel that what they need to develop what needs to happen is much more interpersonal. And so the interpersonal realm is something that people cultivate, and they go into that. So I found that interesting after living in a Zen monastery for a few years, that I became very interested in how I was in relationship to other people in the monastery. How I was released to other people wasn't that interesting for me. I was doing a lot of

concentration practice meditation practice. It was my own relationship to the Dharma to the spiritual life to awaken Something that was really the name of the game. Back to the years of doing that, then it became a phase where the interpersonal relationships who I was in relationship. And for example, how, you know, if I was going to be free, I had to also be free interpersonally. And I got to see how there was a lot of attachments, a lot of fears, a lot of places, I was stuck in my relationships to others. So for example, one thing I experimented with was, I could see that I was very hesitant to let people know really what was going on with me. You know, the way they found out if I got busted. So then, so I made a practice for a while to be an open book, if someone asked me so I didn't volunteer things. Often not a good volunteer, talking about yourself too much if they don't ask, except with your Dharma teacher, and you can go on and have a captive audience. I know it's a good idea and either but you're still here. So I find it very strange it's job I've got long monologues and people listen is No One No One Else I go I can just talk and talk and talk and anywhere else people think I was strange. So here I am talking talking about myself. So I so I saw how hesitant I was and how afraid I was revealing myself. So I made it I made it a practice to be an open book. So if anybody asked me about me, I would tell them anything they asked, What do you think of that there was back then you really want to know

It's July 4, Liberation Day. Oh boy, this is gonna take a long time. I have I have a number of Buddhist names. Then the name I was given as a Zen monk is ryuuga cogen which means dragon Tusk, sunlight revere, it's two names dragon tusk sunlight revere. There was a famous Chinese Zen teacher named dragon Tusk. So I think the dragon test part was supposed to be my ferocity. So watch out in the Sunlight, sunlight revere sunlight was something I was supposed to grow into. That's what I was told for someone And probably name I have is Dhamma demo dust I mean serve into the Dharma. So shake I'm gonna talk or do you want to ask me? No? No, you have your chance. I said, open the door for problems now. No

happy to talk to my mother but I don't know if it makes sense for anybody else to hear. So there's a space into personal face, who knows what it looks like experimenting finding out was like and what happened with you know, just being more more open to people as they asked me it was a very, very useful thing. I did exercise I did. There was also relationships. I had with people like, I find that very interesting to work with the relationships I had with some of my teachers. And there were some teachers, there was one teacher in particular, who I had a lot of perhaps projection or transference issues with and saw as a great authority figure, I was somewhat intimidated about, you know, being around this teacher. And so it was my task I felt, to figure out how to be able to meet the teacher as an equal. And what would it take what what did what did I have to face in myself and deal with myself and look at myself and what kind of inner strength to have to cultivate what kind of progress to let go of so that I could kind of work with his teachers who can meet and I was a little bit helped by the not that and without an idea. This was important because I Zen because in Zen they have an idea that practice is not only something you do personally, but it's also a matter of you know, becoming a Buddha yourself. But you only become a Buddha really, if you become a Buddha with someone else who did a Buddha, they say face to face. And so it's a matter of somehow something about the purity or the directness, or the wakefulness of two people meeting, that's considered to be very important. So you have to meet somehow in equal in some way, as in order to kind of let that relationship come to fruition. So that was a phase where I found that very useful to deal with those kinds of issues that sometimes are considered maybe more psychological than their you know, some people's or fate. There's a can be phases where it seems like what's important and practices to be of service. And so, after receiving a lot of benefits from doing a practice for oneself, it just feels like it's really important to turn that or turn it outwards and offer support to other people. Some people will practice for a long time. in a very personal way, before they stood face of service face, some people find that what works best for them is to start with service face. And to actually spend the first years of practice doing just a lot of support and help and, and as a



faith oriented helper. And that does something to the heart, it does seem to the mind to develop certain qualities, that that's how they develop some of the things that are important. Many years ago, I taught a retreat, and somebody placed in the Midwest. And when I came back, I received a letter from the organizer of the retreat and said that they want to, he wanted me to intervene somehow, because he was really troubled. There was a bit they put up they made a lot of return put on a lot of retreats over the years. And there was one person who always came to the retreats. But the person the person was not making any progress. And would I, you know, my distance somehow do something about this problem. Or what should be done about this problem, this person not making progress? Well, I remember meeting the person, nice person, but, you know, I hadn't, I was only there for once one retreat. So I didn't really know the person well enough to know about how the person changed over time. But I wrote back saying, you know, I didn't really feel like I was in a position to offer advice, but that you had to be careful about how you measure progress. Because you don't know what's needing, needing to be developed in someone's heart and someone's mind. It could be that for whatever reason, it might be very personal reasons. That person with a person needs to cultivate and develop for years sometimes, is their faith. Faith is a very valuable asset and very important or confidence or inspiration or Love of the Dharma or their love of awakening or practice. And it's not a matter of, you know, becoming more awakened or practicing, you know, conventional ways of developing more meditation practice or concentration and these kinds of things. But rather, it's the whole faith side that needs to be awoken. And sometimes people will show up and be around Dharma seen for years, come to retreats and do all this. And what's really something very important is cultivating mellowing ripening. And when the faith if it's faith, at some point that their faith can be so ripened,

that they're ready to sit down, not still, and then they can go fast. There are other people who might not have much faith, much faith, much confidence, much inspiration, exactly. But the here a teacher says, oh, if you're really serious about this practice, you have to sit down, close your eyes, focus on your breath, get concentrated, and if you really do this way You'll be liberated. And so they sit down. But somehow the faith hasn't really ripen sense. So somehow their hearts heartfulness that needs to be part of it isn't really there, the sense of surrender perhaps or the softening that can happen with faith is not there. And so they were like me when I was young huffing and puffing with my breath, you know, trying to make something happen. And, and just, you know, sometimes people can, it just doesn't work. And then they hit a kind of a brick wall, and sometimes they leave spiritual practice entirely because they're given the wrong instruction. And so you need to be very respectful and careful about evaluating yourself but also other people about what they're doing, what's cultivating what's working, what's, what's really happening with them and their practice their life. And you don't want to kind of shoehorn everyone into a set mold, of what spiritual practice Buddhist practice look looks like or what phase person's in. Because there's so many different things that are going on at different times for people. That you have to kind of be very sensitive to what's going on. As a teacher, then one of my jobs is to try the best I can to understand what people's intentions are. Because hopefully they have their intention is what they need to follow, on setting support the intention they have, the intention is to do deep inner personal solitude, solitary kind of practice to support that, if that's appropriate. If what's what's important is to do a service, go off and offer some service be a hospital chaplain, then I'll support them to do that. If what they're to do is to a phase of life where maybe they should study like for me, I spent 10 years basically 10 years of my life, in Buddhist monastic settings, without leaving doing intensive practice. Then that phase came to a conclusion came to an end. And the next phase I felt at the time was, I felt I needed to study Buddhism for a while, because in the monastery, I didn't study very much. You had to practice a lot. But in terms of reading the sutras in history of Buddhism, I hadn't done that. And it seemed like I was starting to kind of people are starting to expect me or asked me to be a teacher. And I didn't feel like I was ready. And I felt like I needed to study and understand Buddhism better. So there's a phase of my life where I studied Buddhism to be better prepared to be a teacher. So

sometimes people come to me and they want to study that's the phase they're in. And one of the values that I got from intellectual you know, studying at university, would be in university, like at Stanford was a certain kind of intellectual liberation. Freedom it's very easy for I was kind of chess and is the right word humbled when I was an undergraduate because as an undergraduate I studied, I was really into being studying organic farming and I was kind of born again or dentist or hygienist fundamentalist. And then I took these science classes, soil science classes and science of what happens and I was surprised to learn that my cherished some of my cherished organic beliefs weren't true. And I was cutting chest and that I'd have these kind of strong kind of the held beliefs about what was true when I actually didn't know. So when I got involved in religious practice, I had this guest suspicion that religious people as a kind of generalization, are more prone to generalizations are more prone to kind of say this is what's true, then farmers are. And so I said, I don't want to do this again. I think I need to learn how to scale and the ability to understand and look at my beliefs, question them, look at what's the underlying assumptions that support them.

So I don't end up doing the same thing with Buddhism. And so part of the value of me of the intellectual study was to help me free myself from that tendency to try to free myself from the tendency of this kind of, so I call intellectual liberation. You know, maybe that was a kind of peculiar trait of mine that I needed that face. So I said, So, one thing as a teacher is to listen to people's intention. Ask them, you know, what do you want? What kind of spiritual practice Are you engaged in right now. Excuse me, it's, but then it's also a matter of listening more deeply than what you think is your intention, what you think your practice should be about what you want your practice to be about. But sometimes, there's something deeper going on that's maybe deeper than what your surface mind can recognize. So how do you how do you discern what that is? How do you find that? Sometimes it's intuitive, you find a strong, intuitive pull towards going in some direction. So, as I told you, this phase in my own practice, where compassion was really important, being developed, without it being conscious choice. I kept gravitating towards images, people situations that were Somehow that embodied compassion. So there was just kind of just kind of orientation that kept happening, something inside of me knew that that's what I should focus on. Even though I didn't know, something inside of me, that wasn't me was deciding. So sometimes you have to listen to that. And so one of the things we can ask and practice is not so much what we want, but what's being asked of us. what's what's, what's our heart asking us to do? As opposed to what the mind is telling us to do. And that's one of the values of getting quiet is so we can listen quietly. If we get very quiet and listen to the heart or something intuitive inside and see what's being asked of us. What what needs to develop now, which needs to happen now. If you're near the end of your life, which sometimes we don't know when is good, you know, if you're getting to be old, so can you say some people are old? Is that no longer correct? Not that any of you are old. But someday, if you're lucky enough, you'll be old. And at some point, you've come to this magic mid turning point in your life. Some people, it's when they're 4550, I don't know what it is 55 6065 some people wait until they're hundred and five. But when you realize, wait a minute, I can, I can see the end in sight. Like, you know, I don't have endless time anymore. You know, if I was 20, I could imagine going back to school and getting a law degree. I can imagine going, you know, doing this, but you know, I'm 65 or 75. And I don't think even though interested in doing that, you know, just doesn't make sense anymore. Sometimes Sometimes people do that were inspired, but you know, priorities shift and change. And so when when, when we get a sense of the end, priorities change, and different things become important. And so phase of life phase of practice, then rep can, has a lot to do with that sense of fine finiteness, or where tality or end or since if I'm going to do something, this important thing has to do with now. And so then that's going to inform the phase we're in. But if you're young, if you're 20 or 21, then sometimes it's useful to kind of have a kind of wider panorama. It's, it's, well, I'm probably gonna be doing this for the next 2030 years, somewhere other And so yeah, so it maybe makes sense to go to school. Maybe it makes sense to do these unfinished these unresolved things, work on my issues with my parents,

perhaps. You know, sometimes if you're you know, at Five and now we only have a few months to live. certain issues that you had earlier on, kind of lose their strength anymore doesn't become so important to face them in the way was important maybe when you were younger. So that was my attempt to suggest to you know that spiritual life Buddhist life goes through all kinds of phases. And some of them are cyclic, we repeat and revisit some of them. Some of them go through once we don't want to go through again.

Sometimes a phase can be very dramatic. Some people can have very deep realization experiences very early on, and then become a mess. Because they have all this unresolved stuff that they haven't worked on yet. They haven't haven't dealt with. And other people who do work on all the unresolved stuff first, and for years, 2030 years they Why am I so my friends are getting these deep experiences and I'm not but then after doing all this inner work, then they're more prepared. And then they can have some more dramatic transformation that maybe something happens. There's so many ways in which this unfolds, I, it's very important that you each of you are very, very respectful, respectful, to the point of maybe loving yourself. And, and really appreciating respecting, loving, that you have your own way. And your own way represents you know, your own way, you know, has a lot to do with how all these different relationships, all these different issues in life, come together, meet you in this juncture of now. So don't look for other people as fixed models of how to be for you. Write the model so what might inspire you and point you in directions and support you But the only person who can really know which phase you're in, is you. So, I hope you find your way I hope that's profoundly meaningful and liberating, and before you're enlightened, you all it'd be nice if you were compassionate. But if the compassion meant comes after the Enlightenment, that's fine too. Thank you