

2010-06-06 What We Attend To

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SPEAKERS

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At the heart of the practice we do at IMC the heart of Buddhism is attention. And

learning about attention, learning how to use our attention is an important part of the endeavor of the path to freedom, deliberation. And I like the word attending, as kind of a substitute for Attention. Attention is kind of like the state of attending or the process of attending back which attends to and attention or attending is really at the heart or this at this at the Center for everything humans do. Everything. We're aware of our new way we negotiate our world is through the avenue or through the vehicle of attention or attending to things. And some of you during this last meditation session, were aware of what you're attending to. And it wasn't necessarily a pretty some of you smoke left. And, you know, you're trying to attend to the breath perhaps. And instead the mind has other plans. And so you're attending to the past or the future fantasy or something. And, or, you know, we go to work and we attend to certain things we go to our communities in our homes, we attend to certain things, and what we attend to or how what we do with our attention is really central to our capacity to be happy to be free to be compassionate. So Buddhism puts a lot of attention on Attention, attention and attention. And we know that in the mindfulness tradition because we mindfulness is all about being mindful, certain kind of attention. But what's it's a lot of people focus on kind of heightening their attention, their ability to pay attention, which is a good thing. But very important in this endeavor is not only learning to pay attention, but learning what to pay attention to, and how to pay attention. And it might be that learning what to pay attention to and how we pay attention is more important than simply learning to pay attention. Certainly, if attention becomes really strong, then it becomes easier and more obvious what we should be attending to. So it may sometimes can come in the heels so just heightened awareness. But it's also a wise life is one that learns that what what is useful to pay attention to. So for example, in interpersonal relationships, where there is maybe some difficulty going on, someone maybe is even being hostile towards you, caused you harm in some way. There's a number of choices about what to pay attention to. You can attention to pay attention to your fear, you can pay attention to your self righteousness, you can pay attention to blame such things. Sometimes they're appropriate to pay attention to those things. But the whole kind of psychology of the person relationship changes if we learn to also pay attention to the suffering of the person who is causing harm. And not to excuse them for what they've done. But it changes the whole ecology and what and if there's, then there's a deeper understand And what might prompt them what's causing them to be the way they are? They are. And then we can respond to the pain the person has, rather than responding to the acts that they've done. So I see this at home with my two kids. They two boys, two boys, right? And they're that age. I don't know, maybe it's, I hope it's I hope it's I hope it's that you know that age. I'll go in very soon

where they fight. And so as a parent, what do I pay attention to. And sometimes it's very useful to pay attention to what's behind the fighting, not the fighting and not to date what to who, but the conditions.

So for example, sometimes, like they're really tired sometimes like, it's like yesterday they were all exhausted but then they stay up late school. plays all kinds of stuff and, and tired young boys is not a good thing in this universe. So so then we okay so it's not just a matter of kind of setting boundaries and separating them but also attending to their tiredness to understanding what's going on there and then is more compassionate they're struggling as well. So, learning what what to pay attention to is an interpersonal relationship can change our understanding of what needs what was needed in different times and different situations. The same thing you know, and paying attention to ourselves. We attend What do we what do you usually attend to? When you take when you pay attention to yourself and is it useful? Is it that is it productive what you usually your how your mind usually looks at yourself looks at your life interprets it. The Buddha very much encouraged people to Practice what he called the word in English usually translated as appropriate attention, or wise reflection. The Pali word is Yoni, so money secara. Money secara means kind of like, the attending of the mind that which the mind attends to. And the only so means kind of like it has kind of connotation. Yoni means like womb. So it's usually translated as wise, like wise attention, but it's that which is productive and useful. And, and so they give birth to something, something, there's unwise attention. And there's wise attention. So if someone if you're really upset about something that had been in the past, and, you know, I've carried anger with me for years about my girlfriend, you know, it's a little bit comes back and forth. And it's easy kind of sit there and think about and all that. But what's a useful way of paying attention to useful to keep staying festering with the sense of injustice and hurt and, and remembering more and more and more and more all those things that happen, you know, in spiraling down? Or is it more useful to pay attention to what it's like for me to be upset in the present moment? And it's more productive. It's more Yoni. So it's more helpful to stay in the present moment arising of experience than it is to be lost in the past reviewing it and kind of being pulled down by it. And so it experienced myself here I am, I'm angry and upset. What's that? Like? Whereas I feel like What's that? What's going on here for me in the present moment, that's useful. And not a few people have discovered that when they pay attention to when they bring their attending, not to The person they're angry with, but they attend to what it feels like to be angry themselves, they decide it's not worth it. But if they're blinded by the object of anger, they don't feel and see the cost it has for themselves. And so then they don't realize the cost. And so they merely go along and be angry or whatever it might be. So to turn the attention, so it's useful to pay attention to some things, if what you want to do is to alleviate your suffering. And so we say in Buddhism, it's useful to pay attention to, to attend to what's going on in here with yourself in the present moment, as the present moments unfolding, What is your reaction, what are your beliefs, so how so what are you attending to is very important, and then how you attend is very important. And so part of the how and part of the what the meaning of it too is with what concept of self do you apply to the experience you're attending to. So, if you are attending to a situation, as this situation requires me to be dominant, you know, I need to be the dominant alpha male in this situation to the alpha female to have that. I never heard that term, but you people, you want to be gender equal time here equals playing so. So

and so some people will look at a situation through the filter of how does this you know, create my the appropriate dominance with a strength so everyone can see, this is who I am, or someone else will see it through the feeling of lack. And see, I feel like I'm lacking something. And so now I look at the situation through the filter of how can I get what I'm lacking, or some people will look through, Look at, look at look through the filter of their desires, and so they're kind How can I get my desires fulfilled? Some people look out through the filter of their fear. And so they're always scanning the horizon. Where's it safe here? It's secure here. And that's kind of the how they're attending. And so part of the important thing to pay attention to to attend to is, is what are the ways in which we're paying attention? What's the how, what's the quality, that attention we're paying we're using. And if we if you pay attention to those two things, what you're attending to and question what is a useful thing to attend to here? And

then how do I attend to it, a lot of your difficulties and stresses of your life will kind of probably diminish quite a bit.

So this is all a introduction to the talk. If I may, because

When I wanted to kind of thing I kind of wanted to talk about today was the teachings the Buddha gave as he was dying. Because when someone has been a teacher for 45 years as the Buddha was, he's had a lot of experience, teaching, organizing his teachings, teaching different people that situations. And he died knowing he was going to die. You could see it coming. And so he could kind of plan for it. And a teacher like that, because we're teaching is a central focus of his life. This was an opportunity for him to do his final teaching and to do it in a considered mindful way, and to say what was most important? And so, if you want to know when what is Buddhism really about? One place to go is to say what was it? What was the last thing that you had to say about it when he had his last word last chance to talk about it? And there's a remarkable passage where he does this.

He starts by saying, talking about those matters, which I discovered and proclaimed, should be thoroughly learned by you practice developed and cultivated. So he starts off by Talking about what I've discovered. So discovered is maybe, you know, something, something experiential, something immediate. It's not a theory, something to be seen or understood and very direct, immediate way. And then he says you should learn it. But then he has all these other words that are more important, maybe more important than learning. Because the emphasis, practice, develop and cultivate. So this is not a religious tradition that says, learn a creed and hang on to the creed. It's a religious tradition that's pointing to something that we need to do. That we're trying to develop ourselves, practice ourselves. There, you don't just read a lot of books about Buddhism, and then understand what Buddhism is actually understanding what Buddhism is intellectually. Doesn't really it's like, you could you could read a lot of books on swimming and think you know what swimming is. But you know, you have to kind of get in the water and, and learn to swim really, right So, his engagement is involvement of practicing, developing and cultivating. So you should you should learn these things and practice them. But he makes an excellent, next is a very interesting statement. He gives a reason why you should do this. So that the holy life kind of spiritual life practice may endure for a long time, that it may be for the benefit and happiness of the multitude out of compassion for the world for the benefit and happiness of DevOps and humans. It's kind of interesting that here, the emphasis is not you should do it because then you'll be happier. You'll be freer. The emphasis here, this is something you could do for your society, for your for others, and, you know, into the future for the next generations. And what is it about What what prompts a human person human being, to live a life to be very motivated in their life to engage in a deep spiritual practice in such a way to doing it, not only for themselves, but whether they are also doing it for others for the society around them for the future direct generations as we go forward. What is it that what Why do that? Why what why is that central and integral to why the blue widow is trying to teach here? Shouldn't isn't Buddhism all about self you know, but your own practice, be mindful here, becoming liberated.

Then he goes on to say, and what are those matters? I discovered? So here he's gonna say this is gonna This is gonna in very brief, he's gonna say what do you really discovered, as if what he discovered is more important than what he taught in terms of a creator. Something. So. And this all feeds back to this introduction to the talk today, the emphasis on what we pay attention to, and how we pay attention. And what are those matters I discovered, they are the four foundations of mindfulness, the four right efforts, the four roads to power, the five spiritual faculties, the five mental powers, the seven factors of awakening, and the Noble Eightfold Path. Some people giggle when they hear all these lists. But these, these lists are not meant to be lists. They're pointing to practices, of attention. of

things we pay attention to. And and, and how we pay attention and what results as we pay attention in a careful way. So the four foundations of mindfulness has to do with what we pay attention to, is practice to cultivate and develop our capacity to attend by attending to our body. Attending and paying attention to what goes on in our physical experience become a heightened, heightened sensitivity, embodiment in our body, to be present in the world through our body. Many people spend much of their day not connected to their body, not aware of what goes on in the body. The body is a phenomenal in Buddhism, the body's treated not as a thing. But as a almost like a series of processes but as a as almost like an organ of perception. And it's alive The body is alive with sensitivity and awareness and processing and understanding and a lot of different things. And if we're in touch with our body, we're in touch with the wisdom of the body. If we're not in touch with the body, it's not available. So if we're going to pay attention to something, it's useful to have the attention in the body, to be sensitive to to be attending to that. The second foundation of mindfulness is to pay attention to the feeling tones of our experience. Because a lot of our reaction to the world amazing amount of reactions we have to the world has to do about whether we like it or not like it. And so the basis for not liking and liking and not liking is whether it's pleasant and unpleasant. And so to be able to notice that it's pleasant, unpleasant as it's occurring, can give you a tremendous window into your reaction to things. It's easy not to notice the liking and not liking or they're pleasant and unpleasant, and then have automatic reactions to it. The third foundation of mindfulness so it's useful to Pay attention to the quality of your mind and the quality of the mind that pays attention. Again, it's very easy to be blinded by all the things we're concerned about. We're thinking about things things are important. We're planning ahead for something. But to step back and look at the quality of the mind, have you ever probably had some experience like this, where you're doing something, I don't know what maybe like a painting or a little craft project or something home, repair something, painting your wall of your house and you're working in working kind of in it, then you step back and take a look at your work. And there's a whole different thing that happens when you step back, then when you're kind of caught up in the details. And if you're preoccupied with what's going on, you step back. And that's nice. You can kind of more wider global experience of it all. There may be a little bit of relief sometimes to step back and not be caught up in the details. Kind of relaxing goes on. But then it's possible to step back one more time away from the painting your painting. And step back one more time in the mind, to be aware of the quality of the mind. That's paying attention. So you're looking at your painting, you're preoccupied, you step back, and you look what you've done. And then you step back one more time, and you look at the feeling tone, the quality, the sense, the experience, what it's like to pick a pig to be paying attention.

If you step back one more time, what do you find out? What is the quality of that attention? If you step back a little bit and look at the quality of the thing you're doing, and you look at the quality of attention, you might see it's more spacious, more open, it's not so concentrated or fixed. But you might feel that there lingering in that attention? Might be a sense of Hurry, you know, gotta get this done quickly, that good but I get back or there might be anxiety Am I really doing a good job or there might be all kinds of thoughts and concerns that might be there or there might be no concerns, the awareness the attention might be there without any added thoughts or concerns or reactions and what is the quality of the attention awareness that it has no at connected attitude or thoughts or fears or preoccupations or clinging or worries. Is it possible to step back in the mind into the quality of the mind so that you go behind the contracting constricting attitudes of mind to an awareness, which is really big and wide and spacious, kind of like an awareness that has a lot of breathing room. A lot of room and space. And then what's that, like? Is that valuable? Does that have importance? relaxed, open, soft, spacious awareness is so broad and wide. It's almost as if you've shifted from tank paying attention to the objects in the room, to paying attention to the space in a room. So you can do that here. You know, you can even you officially have a high ceiling here, you can kind of look above but everybody's head and get a sense of the space in the room. And it's very different than fixating or focusing on the objects of what's

happening in the room. So the same thing with awareness, you can step back and awareness far enough that the quality of the mind becomes so open so broad, so spacious, in a kind of beautiful way empty. And so that the objects of the mind, the mind usually Pays Attention Attention to exist within that space, rather than, you know the object is the thing. So, the Buddha said the third foundation of mindfulness paying attention to the quality of the mind, this is very useful to do. The fourth foundation of mindfulness is that it pay attention to all the internal processes in the mind, as they're operating and working, are there to pay attention to those processes in the mind where that involve contracting, they give birth to suffering, and those processes of the mind that involve release freedom. softening the mind opening the mind. If what you want to do is to have a free mind, it's helpful to pay attention to those two things, what contracts with limits the mind What creates a more unlimited qualities of mind. So this is kind of things that are useful to pay attention to. So now the juxtaposition in this quote, for me, is between the Buddha saying, Do cultivate these things out of compassion for the world, on one hand, and then what you're doing is paying attention to these four foundations of mindfulness in yourself. What's the connection between attending to yourself, your body, your feelings, your mental states, mental processes, and being compassionate to the world? It's an interesting question, right? One answer is that you're much more likely, you're much less likely to cause harm in the world. If you're that much in touch with yourself and doing less harm is a really good boy is it good But then on top of that, you're more likely, I think, to try to do some good in the world to live in a way that's more helpful. If you're in touch with these things, rather than being in touch with these things, making you more selfish, and make, it'll make you less selfish, because selfishness itself is a contraction of the mind is a preoccupation in mind. Selfishness decreases the quality of the mind of the heart. And if you're learning to pay attention to all these things, you cannot remain selfish. If you want to be selfish, don't practice mindfulness.

Don't be selfish. Don't pay careful attention to yourself. If you pay careful attention to yourself, you can't you know, you know, destroy selfishness. We'll see how painful it is. So and then good Buddha goes on to a number of other lists. There's the Eightfold Path. So it's useful to pay attention. These are areas that are useful to attend to in your life, I tend to you know, right intention, right view, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration, to attend, attend to these things, be interested in them, explore them, see how they work in your life might be sensitive to recognize their importance. And then the last one I want to mention here today is the, what's called a list called the seven factors of awakening. And which is really beautiful, beautiful qualities of mind that get developed. As the mind becomes more as as we learn as the attention gets stronger as our ability to attend. In a careful, relaxed way it gets that gets stronger, these qualities of mind gets stronger and stronger, their natural qualities of mind that are relatively easy to Recognize I hope, if you're if they're, if you're if you're if you're, they're pointed out to you. And so the way I like to try to do it, is to try to evoke for you, if you can remember some time in your life when you woke up from a really refreshing nap or woke up and there was a really it was beautiful lighting, maybe they're beautiful morning light or something and you had just the right amount of food and the temperature is really nice. There's nothing you have to rush off and do just wake up and everything's just seems so good and you feel really awake is it kind of clarity and certain kind of balance there just nice energy just being awake and alert. And in that, if you can remember a time like that, perhaps you can remember that in that moment, in that moment, those moments that there was a kind of a natural attention, natural mindfulness in the present moment what's going on here. You weren't inclined to start reading What happened in your high school prom? You know, the present moment is kind of alive and vibrant. And so there's this heightened sense of mindfulness attention to here. And perhaps that heightened sense of attention to here gives rise to a little more interest in what's here. You walk, you walk outside into the street, and you see some flowers in the neighbor's garden. And you're kind of interested you look more carefully, you sense and feel the quality of the, of the light of the air of what was going around and kind of you're interested, what

is this? And perhaps there's a kind of energy there is a little bit there kind of vitality, not over energized, not under energized, just kind of kind of energy perhaps it's almost invisible unless you it's pointed out to you but kind of it's kind of a balanced energetic state and that kind of alertness. There's a kind of delight or sense of well being that's there. Perhaps there's a Capacity if it was there necessarily the capacity to get more concentrated before focused on what something needs to be done. And most important, perhaps there's a sense of equanimity, a balance equipoise or a less of a tendency to react to the things that go on. So that's how you know you're in this you woke up from wonderful nap. You feel quite beautifully clear and relaxed, present content and the telephone rings. Do you rush over to pick up the pick it up at the first ring? Are you kind of old telephones ringing I'll get to it to three rings whatever. Or you break a glass in your kitchen. I broke a glass here that day in my kitchen. Broken glass in the kitchen. You know? The glass looks good. Broken Glass looks beautiful.

As opposed to what I collect. Mine doesn't react, you know so strongly in usual ways. So these are I think I'd like to try to say these are ordinary qualities that can be there. But as attend as we learn to 10 more carefully, as their attention gets stronger, these come along. And then what the Buddha said. As these get developed, it's useful to notice them. So again, what we pay attention to is important. So it's useful to notice the degree to which there is mindfulness, investigation, energy, vitality, joy, tranquility, calmness, concentration, and equanimity is this, these seven factors and these seven factors, the Buddha likened to a treasures not just any treasure, but the treasures of a world ruling monarch is supposed to be seven treasures that are world reading market in India would have is kind of like as the North it's called executive with the insignia are the things that are the kind of the symbols of power. And so the seven, you know, we're going to be our own monarchs, we have to have seven treasures. And those seven treasures are these seven factors of awakening. So they pay attention to them. Notice them so the challenge for you I'd like to offer you is for you just starts noticing how what you attend to what do you commonly attend to when you go about your life. take an inventory Stop every hour for a couple of days, maybe have a notepad or something and write down. What do you tend to attend to? Or have timers that go off every 10 minutes randomly or something? And then say, oh, what am I? What am I attending to now? find some way to notice what Where is your common things you attend to? And then ask yourself, Is this the right thing to be attending to? Maybe it is. There's what you're attending to kind of what it looks like you're supposed to be attending to, and then there's attended what what your mind is really doing. But anyway, so then there's, if it is what you're supposed to be attending to, and is the way in which you're attending. One that serves you the best. How are you attending? So those two questions What are you attending to? What do you tend to attend? What do you tend to attend to as you go about your life? And if it's useful what you're needed to be are useful with you're attending to. How are you doing that? Are you doing it with the presence of any of these seven factors of awakening? Is there a careful mindfulness? Is there a stepping back? Soon, so there's a kind of a wider sense of awareness of space or calm. Is there tranquility or calmness with what you're doing? Is there engagement? Now you're appropriately engaged with it with experience? Or are you kind of resisting? Is there joy or sense of well being? Is there equanimity? Or is there a lot of reactivity? Is there some freedom and doing it? Or are you caught up in it in some way? Is there a lot of self concept that's being played out in it? Or you're doing it without much self at all self concept? So what are you You're paying attention to, and how are you paying attention? What are you attending to? And how are you attending. And if you do that, then you're paying attention to what's at the heart of Buddhism. Buddhism does not require you or need you to believe in almost anything, except to believe that you can be trained to believe that you can cultivate a heightened capacity to pay attention. Just that that's what you need to believe. You have to need to believe it enough that you'll do it. And beyond that, you know, what does the Buddha believe? Who knows? So, I have about five minutes before we usually stop. And Would anybody like to ask any questions or make any comments? Yes.

Could you just repeat the seven factors? Again, please? The seven factors of awakening are mindfulness, investigation, energy or effort, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

Good question. So that the answer to that question has to do with how we attend to them when you're in here Oh, so the question is, if we pay attention to fear Does that make them stronger? And so the answer to that is, it depends on how you pay attention to them. So the How is very important? If so, it's possible to pay attention to fear and make the fear get stronger and people go into panic attacks. So also possible to pay attention to fear in different way, and the fear dissipates. One is, if we're caught by our fear, if we're believing our fear, and if we're paying attention to it, by telling ourselves more and more stories, then you probably get more afraid. But if you pay attention to it without telling stories, without adding to stories more and more to it, if you'd pay attention to it by stepping back and feeling in your body, feeling it as a process here now, then chances are that you're not going to fuel it anymore. And also often so it's not so that's why it's very important to understand it's not only a matter of paying attention, but it's very active. We're going to understand how you pay attention. Because you could say, I'm paying attention, my fear all day. Thank you. That's all I pay attention to. And it just gets worse, right? And then way back, we can pass it. Like we used to buy some people use hearing assistant devices. So.

So the question is, if you're just starting out and you can't pay attention to more than 10 or 20 seconds, where do you start out, you start there. That's a good place to begin. 20 seconds is really good. So this is example. So you're starting out and you try to pay attention you do for 20 seconds. And then what happens? What happens right after that? After that My mind goes to my fears or even the mundane like what I should pick up at the grocery store. So then you have a choice, you could either come back to what the breath for example, for another 20 seconds, or maybe next time it's 21 and 21 seconds, slowly it gets stronger. The other thing you could do is if the mind is really forcefully kind of preoccupied by something, then perhaps what's useful is not to focus on the breath. But to step back. Just take a step back and notice my mind I'm thinking about going shopping. All the things I have to do in mind is thinking, This is what a mind is like that has 10,000 things on its mind. And let me take my 20 seconds that I get and notice 20 seconds worth of what it's like to have Mind is out of control. And then, and then at 20 seconds, you'll lose that you'll get caught up again. And then as soon as you remember, you step back again. And you start taking responsibility for understanding and seeing that mind that you have. Because my guess is that mind that busy out of control mind that you have is starving for attention. It really needs you to attend to this PC to see it and feel it more important to seeing it to feel what's there, feel what drives it. And if you don't kind of turn and really feel it and sense it and deal with it, it's gonna be very hard to develop attention further. Okay. So

is it nice, I hope it's nice that to have a different word than mindfulness. I gave you the word attending. We practice it typically your neighbors can ask what do you do when you go to IMC I attend. Thank you.