

2011-04-09 The Journey of Practice

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SPEAKERS

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One way of thinking of thinking about human life or human lives is that it's multi dimensional, that there are different dimensions, different levels, different things going on at the same time. Maybe something a little bit like, you know, if you go for a walk, just to go for a walk, get some fresh air and just nice to walk. Someone asks you what's the purpose of the walk, not just to go somewhere. But maybe just to walk. But it could also be that you're just going for a walk. But you're also going someplace. You just happened to be going to the store to buy groceries in, buy some pick something up as well. The point is not to buy the groceries at points just to walk for the walking sake, maybe, but still, you're also going someplace. It could be you're walking just for walking sake. But as you walk, it connects you more with your neighborhood. And you feel that you know, you know thinking about that so much, but you feel more connected to the place that you're at. And you get to know the trees and the birds and the neighbors and you get to know things. It could be that you're just going for a walk and going for the walk. puts you through changes takes you to a new neighborhood you never been to and it's kind of challenging to be that neighborhood and you have to deal with your fear and being frightening. neighborhood, you work with a fear and you come to the other side and you realize that you've kind of been changed by that experience. Or you can go for a walk explicitly to go grocery buy groceries or explicitly to go and learn about the neighborhood, you have an agenda and something you're going to do. And that. So what I'm trying to say is that you could have two or three or five different things happening at the same time with any endeavor, there might be the explicit purpose that you have. And there might be the associated aspects of it that maybe you weren't thinking about originally, but that come into play. So same thing when we do a Buddhist practice, do a mindfulness practice, there might be the purpose we have for the practice. And then there's all the associated things that also come into play as well. Some people practice just to very explicitly the main purpose is not to get anything but just to be in the present moment to let the Present Moment unfold as it wants to unfold. It's kind of like, you know, like just going for a walk just here and let things happen. And in some people practice very explicitly for two, to go somewhere in their practice, they want to develop their concentration. They want to develop their capacity for compassionate loving kindness. And so they work on that and develop it. And there's a kind of a goal and a purpose of what you're trying to get to. Some people are doing it not just to be in the present moment, but to get to know the neighborhood. And apparently, it's a cliché, many people know, but I just heard about it recently. Someone said, the cliché is my mind in my mind, dangerous neighborhood. That was kind of cute. So you know, to get to know the neighborhood's we go, we practice and we guys get to know ourselves. Some people are not so much in touch with their emotions, and so it's to kind of get familiar with their emotional lives, or some people not so aware of their cognitive life, what they think and believe. And so you go into the neighborhood and you explore what the beliefs are and all that. And that's the intention.

If you just go for a walk, if you're just sitting to be present, you might become aware of the neighborhood. If you sit to be present, it might put you through changes that develops your compassion, perhaps, is not your intention. But what happens so that, for example, that's what happened to me. I did this Zen practice, my early years of practice, which was a kind of a non dual practice just showing up and being present with things as they are. And, to my surprise, my compassion developed and you could see there was a course a journey of developing an opening to compassion over the years of Zen practice, and for me, and so there's other thing going on. It's also it's learning about myself that was that was going on. There's many different levels. And what I'd like to talk about today is The level or the way of looking at practice from the point of view, that we're involved in a journey and, and to invoke be involved in a spiritual practice can be seen as being part of a journey that has a beginning and a middle and end. And some people find it very helpful to think of it as a journey, because then they have a sense of purpose or a sense of orientation, what it's about. Some people find the sense of a journey, oppressive, because it means that you have to get someplace that's different than where you're at right now. And so that's, you know, you know, just, you know, somehow something wrong about being present here. I'd like the word journey, because coming from the French word for a day, you and one of the things about the journey, as I understand it, it's how far you're traveling one day and so And how far do you travel one day is up to you. You know, it's not like some set length of time or distance. It's just different. Some days you work very short distance, some days, you can walk a long distance, but it's just to happen in my mind, they were journeys, very respectful of the idea of each person goes in their own pace, each person does it in their own way. And you go as far as short as, as is your, your journey of that particular sitting or that particular day or that particular month or that particular life that you have. And what a journey involves going through changes, something happens in the course of the journey. And I want to suggest that somewhat likely, five different steps to a spiritual journey that we can take. And I don't think we want to kind of locked in that this is the only way of understanding spiritual life and practice life, but it might be helpful. For the, to look at it from this vantage point of these five aspects of the journey. The first aspect is begins with recognition that something's off. Something's not quite right. There's some possibility that things can be different than how they are now. I'm suffering. There's problems in the world, in my family, there's, there's there must be something that's different than that has more meaning than the life that I have right now. There's something something you know, something's off. And without that feeling, there's something off something is the generally isn't beginning of a spiritual practice in the end, so I think everybody who comes to it, engage in ongoing spiritual practice or meditate Practice has some sense that something's not quite right to make something could be better. Some people, when they have that feeling, are focused on their suffering the difficulty, and they're trying to fix it or get away from it or to heal it or, or solve it or find some new possibility, get away from something. Some people have more of a sense of, they can see the light, they can see that there's a really they have intuition or a sense or a vision of what's possible. It's possible to live at peace, it's possible to live with love or compassion as possible, live a very different way. And they get a sense of that, rather than kind of reacting away from their difficulty. They're more opening up towards something that they see is that can be a bigger part of their life. So with this sense of something's off, and there's some sense of possibility that things can be different. Is is, you know, kind of the beginning of this. And then the next step of the journey is to decide to do something about it to make a choice, to not continue life as usual.

Because life as usual is not working well enough. And, and so, you know, I remember when I was a new Zen student, the you know, the teaching sense was let go of all your goals. Just sit there and be fully present to this moment and let the moment unfold by itself. But I had to make a decision to not accept the present moment just as going along. I did make a decision to show up at my cushion. I had to make a decision to put down my novel turn off the television. I had to make a decision to change change something in order to show up at the Zen center to sit to do nothing. And because if I just kind

of continued accepting my life as it is, as it was that moment, I would have continued a life of suffering of challenge and difficulty. So there had to be some choice to do something different. So it's one thing to have a sense of something, it says that there's a new possibility there's something is off here. And to really acknowledge that to admit it, to see it. That's a big step for some people. And for some people, it's huge. The first step of admitting, wow, this is not working. My life is not working as it's going right now. This is not some people they don't discover that until they're quite old in life. This is not working anymore. You know, something has to change. So the second step of the journey is to make to make a decision to change to Start a practice to move in a different direction to set out on the journey. And without that setting out without that decision to do it, there's not going to be anything, nothing's going to happen. And then the third step of the journey, which is usually the long phase of the journey, is doing the practice walking the path, doing the practice that you've set yourself to do, whatever it might be, there's a lot of different practices that you can do. And those different practices have these different dimensions. There's the obvious, explicit purpose of the practice and then there's the unknown aspects of how it affects you and what you learn. You go for a stroll in your neighborhood, just to go for a stroll and you learn about your neighbors and become friends with them. That wasn't that intended, but that's what's the context, you know, byproduct. You show up and be present, be mindful and you'll learn about yourself in some way. Or perhaps You learn to be present. And to your surprise it awakens your capacity for empathy. And now you feel much more strongly connected to other people you did before. And now you've that's changed you and so that you know you have to and you respond to life based on that change. A lot of the walking the path is traditionally has a lot to do with purification, letting go of attachment, letting go of the difficulties we have like and go the attachments, clarifying, purifying our intention, purifying our vision, purifying our ability to see and understand. Letting go of how we get distracted. Let go of our fear let go of our sometimes our greed let go of our of our aversions, our resentments let go of our guilt, let go of our sense of inadequacy, let go of a lot of things, learn to let go. There's a lot of that a lot of His path we walk on, but also it involves developing certain things. developing certain maybe latent tendencies capacities we have that are underdeveloped. developing our capacity for generosity or for kindness or for compassion or for patience, or for letting go, or for discipline to being being committed and keeping the course of committed, I'm going to stick to it and do it.

So the third, that third step is just kind of once you've made the decision, the third step is to walk the path, be engaged to do the work. It's sometimes that stage of the path is difficult. Sometimes when you walk walk that journey, the mountain gets pretty steep. Deep. And sometimes a mountain is the path is pretty flat and it's easy. And sometimes it's downhill. And sometimes it's like a snowball that gets you rolling down the hill and it gets bigger and bigger the momentum builds over time. And it just seems easy or it's like you finally get in the into the river and the river carries you nothing you don't do anything river carries you Are there times, you enter the rapids you better paddle fast. And other times, you know, it's dry and it's uphill. You have to work Work hard, and there's no way of knowing ahead of time, what your journey is going to be. But the different days different times different phases. That journey the journey part has different qualities to it different aspects, different ways in which it unfolds. And then the fourth stage in this formulation of a journey is having a vision, a clear enough vision of a new way of being that you can make a commitment to live a new way. So a little bit different than the first kind of where you see it's something else is possible I want to practice and discover. But this is where there's a clear visceral sense of a new way new insight, new way of being in the world. And then a kind of a commitment, I'm going to, I'm going to I'm going to be this new way. Maybe commitment is maybe sometimes the wrong word. Maybe it's a used to you've recognition, you are now different. And you're going to live from that different way. And sometimes that involves big changes in a person's life, where they decide to let go of a certain job they had or certain certain career or certain certain activities they were doing. Or even a certain way of being a certain way of seeing themselves. And, you know, there's,

I had a point in my practice, where it became really clear to me that I had, you know, had a clear sense of what it was like to be alive to be present without defining myself without living with representation idea concept of self of self identity. And I could see at the same time how much I was playing the self identity game. And I saw that I should let go, it was really appropriate let go of this clinging to self to self identity, representing myself to other people certain ways. And I was afraid to do it. And it but I really wanted to make that change. So it took a while to kind of make that commitment to make that choice and kind of get myself established to let go and kind of going in different directions new way to have this new life. There wasn't so self paced the way I've been before. So at some point in the third phase phase, something opens up for us and we see a new possibility. And then we choose to take that new possibility that that sometimes takes a lot of courage. Sometimes, and sometimes it doesn't take any courage. Sometimes we go kicking and screaming, I don't want to do this. But I don't have a choice. You know, I can't I can't do it the way I did before. So this is the this is the way it has to be now.

And then the fifth stage, as an interesting stage here is so once there's this commitment to a new with new way of living a new life then there's celebrating that celebrating this new life sell in appreciating it, valuing it. In some places, there's a welcoming, you're welcomed into this new life. You're welcomed into the community of people who are living this way. I don't know if it always has to be community based, but as this celebrating this acknowledgement, this recognition, yes, this is good. This is wonderful. And I think sometimes in the Buddhist world, this last phase is often not done very much. Sometimes it's done by initiations, that people go through. People get initiations where it's you know, ordination or something or something is recognized. But something in the heart gets, resonates or gets fulfilled or opens up. Sometimes when we take the time to celebrate or wealth Come or appreciate the new life that we want to live the new life, that's where we are living, I think could be family because it gets more rooted in us. And so we find this kind of notion of a journey that has different phases, we find that we are at different points in that journey at different times. And maybe sometimes more like a spiral, we come back to the same place over and over again, but different points and that's, you know, everything. Sometimes it's really clear, we're feeling something is off here. Sometimes it's really clear that we make a decision, I'm going to devote myself to my practice more. I'm going to start again, I'm going to give it I'm going to give it more. Sometimes we're well engaged in practice, and we're just kind of in a law sometimes in the long course. So just heading out. journey has been set and now we know we have Do the walk and just walking. And then sometimes as it comes to it's very clear transition, where there's a kind of sense of a new life, a new commitment or a change, something's really opened up in a nice way. And you can't you can't go back to the way things were before. It's just not possible. I mean, there might be sometimes a pool back there, but it just doesn't make sense anymore. And so there's a kind of a commitment or a decision or, or transformation into a new life into a new way of being. And then sometimes that there's the party. There's a celebration, there's the enjoyment, this is really great. Isn't it wonderful? And, and one of the reasons I think these Buddhist types people don't do enough the celebration is that Celebrating can seem kind of self centered. It's kind of like you know, you're supposed to be free of selfishness and to celebrate enjoy, you know, this new life of mine. I mean, that's back to self again, isn't it? That's the very thing I was trying to get away from. That's what I did get away from it just seems kind of like, against the grain to somehow celebrate. But beautiful things, beautiful things. I think the heart naturally wants to rejoice in beautiful things. to rejoice that probably Buddhist word for rejoices there's a word. Anumodana, to feel anumodana, to feel kind of this, this celebratory or this happiness or this rejoicing. It's a joy and these beautiful things that happen and it's possible to have that for other people. To be so happy, so delighted that that person's become selfish self selfless self. That person becomes selfless. Isn't that fantastic? That's like a gift and a wonderful thing to the world. Oh, isn't that great? But why can't you do that for yourself? you're exempt from celebrating your own good fortune. Because you're now you're selfless. I think then you're just hung up again. I think it's good to I think it's quite. If you're really not hung up and you can really feel the

beauty and the goodness that's welling up in this heart here. I think there's also rejoicing there as well. You feel happy with it.

So some of these journeys that have these five, maybe phases are short journeys, the mini journeys inside the dig journey, and some of them are big journeys to take a whole lifetime. Thank you for your follow along.

I think that the one waves of one way of interpreting Buddhism is that, whether we like it or not, we're always on a journey. We're always on a, on a on some path of change evolution. Because life is not static. Life is always changing. And it's up to you. And there's many possible journeys to take. You could take the couch potato journey, where you spend all your time watching television. That's a journey as you sit and get more lethargic. fatter dollar more disconnected with the world around you. And you come to the end of your life and you know, you just kind of like fade away into kind of, in your dullness, that's a journey. And so, or you could take a different journey. You can take the journey of hate politics, and that will affect you in a certain way. Or you could take there's all kinds of journeys here, but it's always a journey, always evolution always changing, nothing stays the same. And there's a pattern at which to reset Of course, it's inevitable even if you don't want to have a journey. If you don't want to change stop hammering, stop. I just want to be present and accept life as it isn't just not have nothing changed whatsoever. Impossible. It's always going to be Things are always unfolding. And so the question is, what journey Do you want to go on? Which, what direction are you taking? What path Are you taking? And it's consequential what you choose. And all of you chose to come here today. That was your journey. And I see this as a very valuable and significant thing to do with your life and, and it's a journey of one day. You're probably different now than you were at the beginning. And probably you had a variety of things happen in the course of the day that you had to face. But also a day like this is one step in a larger journey of a lifetime of life of practice. I know from my own many one two sittings that I did early years of practice how meaningful it was to sit one days, and how meaningful it was to do them over time, month after month. And how they accumulate effective, how they built and healthy with all the different steps of the journey. I think it's very significant for ourselves and for other people, that there are people who are willing to come to a place like this and sit and be still and quiet. Discover, walk the walk the path here like this. So I say that in my appreciation of all of you and anumodana, my delight, that there are people like you who have the intention and sincerity, the commitment to engage like this. It's a really beautiful thing. Even though I know that, for some of you, it was not easy to do this. And maybe because of how difficult it can be challenging it can be. I have even more delight. Not that I'm delighted that you're suffering but I'm delighted That you would be engaged in a practice to work with that and clarify.

And the last thing I'd like to say is that when your journey is the path of the Dharma path of practice like this, it's not just a matter of per se this way. Part of the very important part of this the Dharma journey. is to let there be a willingness to be changed by it. To be open to be willing to be changed by it in ways that you can't control that you can't even expect. You can't even understand how what's going to happen, some willingness for something for you to be not in control of how it unfolds for you. So it's a good path to walk on. And it's a safe path to let your heart be open and willing to be shaped by it or changed by it as you walk.

So I hope those comments were maybe useful for you. We have a few minutes before the end. If some of you would like to ask some questions. We could do that if you'd like. We can go early. Anybody have anything to ask?

Yes, please.

My mind wandered a lot during the day and I am I just I think I need some reassurance that that is still a good practice or that I'm doing it right.

A few other people here how many people have them Wonder a lot today

it's part of the part of the definitely part of the path. And in fact, it's a huge part of the path is to learn to be to be wise about the mind and the wandering mind. And one of the first steps or one of the steps is, is not so much to control the wandering mind, but to develop a wise relationship to it, have a wise attitude towards it. So, the attitude is not one of criticism or discouragement or upset, but to have some realizing this this is the nature of the mind the human minds is generally there, they wonder a lot they get distracted easily and maybe even have a lot of compassion for it. Because this the strength of the mind that's the strength among being distracted their their strength about being pulled into different thoughts and concerns can sometimes be directly related to To the very strong forces inside of us, we're trying to make sense of our life trying to be safe trying to, you know, make, you know, you know, make our way through this life. And it might not seem that way when you what you're thinking about his dinner menus, but the strength of it comes from some deep place inside. So it has some compassion for that. And to hold that to some care and kindness is a very, that might be a huge first step. And then, and then having that attitude, it's easier than to stop and to look more carefully at what's going on. And, and to discover more deeply what's really going on here with a distracted mind. It's valuable to open it up. If we're if we're critical of it, and feel like we have to kind of dismiss it or overcome it by just coming back all the time to the breath. We might not discover what's really needed what's really going on underneath the surface of that distracted mind, there might be important things to attend to. And, and then every time you come back from being distracted, is a very meaningful time every time you wake up and are notice that your presence is a very, very meaningful. And as we'd like to say, it doesn't matter how many times your mind gets distracted. It only matters how often you wake up how many often you come back. And every time you come back, you're, you've chosen a different journey, different conditioning, you began to slowly let go of some of the forces of preoccupation that you have.

Yes, please.

I'm really surprised at

how much difference there is coming here and doing this in how well I can concentrate. And in my daily practice, because it it's been getting frustrating my daily practice even though I've been doing it every single day. Sometimes it feels like a daydream session, where I'm just going through the motions. I'm sitting down for 25 minutes, half an hour, but not getting any focus, or focusing two or three or four times in that time, you know, you're doing something really ridiculous. And then I come in here and I sit down and all of a sudden, it's something very, very different. But you know, it's the same. Same question. Yeah, same the it's the same me. Why is it so different

and how can I take that back into my

daily practice?

I don't know why different for you but I can get a few reasons why it's sometimes different for people is that sometimes the group helps a lot to sit together with other people there's a good momentum a group sense of importance or value of focus that we pick up by as Moses by people around us. There's a group support if you like, this is like this is the whole I mean, they have 3040 people in one room

doing the same thing. It's kind of like keeps you focused and you know, it's a little bit hard if you're here to start wondering, you know, what's on TV, you know, and, and, and even if you hadn't, you know, one of these smartphones, you can look and see what's on TV. You know, here, you're you're not so likely. Do it I mean, this is gonna have certain certain kind of subtle, subtle kind of unintended peer pressure, you know, that we don't look at our, our smartphones to find out what's on TV when you're middle of a sitting at IMC you know, generally, you know, so there's a kind of discipline or sort of current kind of sense of focus or something like, this is what we're doing, and we're not going to go off and do something else. That that, you know, supports, you know, being connected and be motivated. So, I think they get a sense of being in a group. For some people, they, we get carried by the group that gets supported by the group, we get inspired by the group, we get help with discipline with a group as many things that the group can provide. Also, we pick up from other people, we're inspired by them. Other people are sitting really still near us. And there's a way in which we pick that up, we feel that and, and it kind of, maybe the mirror neurons, we have or something. And we can kind of like, kind of, it's sometimes easier to kind of get into the mode because we get a set. That's what the mode is like we kind of, we kind of pick it up from the people around us in the room and the atmosphere in the room. So that was some of the things I think about. And I know some people, one of the things that plague some people is doubt, they have doubt about the fact that about the practice is what you know, but he come when other people who are motivated doing it, most likely feel doubt. Oh, this is good. You know? So that's what I think, as I speak to you. So the question is, how can you bring this bring your all of us with you home?

our imagination.

I think that though, what you can do is when you're sitting here with a group like this, take some time to register in some visceral way, what it feels like to be sitting in your body, the present in your body, in a group of other people who are meditating, and see if you can have led registers to this kind of visceral memory of what this feels like. And then when you go home to meditate alone, see if you can recall that memory in this in the physical visceral way. And maybe that it can make you feel more grounded, more connected more something that helps you when you're on your own. Tell me one more. Yes.

I just actually wanted to add another suggestion about taking that more into your daily practice at home and I think the more group sitting that you do and retreat actually supports that. And becomes easier and easier to do your daily practice and, and to be more focused in your daily practice.

Yeah, I think so I agree. The other thing that can help at home if you're practicing meditating at home is you can you can't bring bring all of us home with you. But you can bring some of the some of the same elements by, for example, having a special place in your home that's designated only for meditation. Some people have something like an altar. And maybe they have a picture of a teacher or the Buddha or you know, their community of meditating friends or something. So when you sit down, you have the associations and you realize you're not alone. You are practicing together with other people, even though they're not there at that moment. And so you create an environment that replicates and helps inspire your move, motivate you in the way that maybe it is when you come here. Okay, so I want to thank you all for coming and