

2017-11-20 Setting Up For Meditation

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SPEAKERS

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Okay. So as I was saying, I've come back from retreat, and This often happens on retreat. And not often, but sometimes I come back, and I don't think I've been able to say, it's all been said, or it's all been emptied out or something. But what I'm most inspired to talk about is something very practical. And that is the setting up of your meditation practice, kind of the transition to get into your meditation. And it's well worth giving some thought to it, or some attention to it. When I was a college student, I would go every Tuesday and Thursday to sit in group that was in someone's apartment. And I would bike across town, to that's sitting group. And after a while, I did it for two years. And after a while, I was, it wasn't conscious Exactly. But I would start getting myself present, aware, meditating on that bike ride to there. So that process of getting to the place of meditation was part of the settling in and getting focused and being here in the present moment. So the preparations for meditation, it could be as simple as going from your living room to your bedroom, if that's where you meditate and sitting down. And you could just casually kind of wander over and see your meditation cushion. That's what you do, or the chair and just kind of plop down casually. And, you know, I think it's a good idea to meditate now. And there's no, you know, there's no transition, there's no preparation, there's no setting up for the meditation. But it's possible also to do the setting up going to meditation in a very intentional way. And it turns out that when we do things intentionally, we tend to bring along attention, intention, and attention can often go together. So if the act of getting into meditation is done intentionally, with clear kind of sense, this is what I'm going to do now. I'm going to do this intentionally. And we do this with attention and care, then we're much easier to kind of get into the flow of present moment attention, then if we don't bring it the intention to it. So it's a process of setting up for mindfulness. And the in the ancient language, the word that's often translated as the foundations for mindfulness. The four foundations of mindfulness is that classic instructions the Buddha gave for mindfulness practice, the word that translators Foundation, probably doesn't mean foundation. And we're not quite sure what the Buddha meant, because it's a compound word. And the second half a compound word. It can be the way you can divide up the two words apart is a little bit uncertain two different ways. You can either divide it up so it says upatthanā or patthanā. With an U in front or not. Okay, so. So if it's patthanā, it means setting forth of mindfulness, I like launching mindfulness, launching your awareness. What about that? Yeah, get set, go. And I like this idea of launching awareness because it's kind of kind of like it comes alive, the attention. Many people associate meditation was getting calm. And that's not launching, that's kind of like, you know, I guess settling or kind of sinking or something.

When I was in Japan, studying on the Zen monastery, the I didn't, my Japanese wasn't that good. And I certainly couldn't understand the Dharma talks, because they were kind of archaic Japanese and very formalized. And it was kind of a whole ritual way of giving the talks there in the meditation hall. There's a whole ritual. But one day, that meditation that the abbot gave a very animated talk. And he kept saying in dramatic Japanese zazen zazen means Zen meditation, so zazenwa barakatu if you speak

Japanese, I apologize if I didn't quite get it right, but zazenwa barakatu. And so I didn't know what it meant, but I got to work and asked the monks later, what is this barakatu. And they said, Zen Meditation is an explosion. Very different sense of, you know, meditations explosion.

So, launching of awareness launching of mindfulness, the other, but if the word is upatthanā, then it means to stand near to be close to. So to be close to mindfulness, attending to mindfulness. And I like this a lot. Because it's, you have to kind of like the idea of attending our awareness is something we can love or care for, or attend to. So we want to get close to our awareness, be with our awareness, which is a little bit of an unusual idea. When people think I'm trying to be aware, and it's a lot of work, if you want to try to be aware, I feel sorry for the people who are trying to be aware all the time. Because it can lend itself to a lot of work, like I have to do this. I like to think that awareness, you can't help but being aware. It's like, you know, that's what your system is your whole kind of, I don't know, knothole. But you're, you're set up to be aware, you can't really get through his life without a lot of awareness. And you're aware all the time you're aware. You know, through the day, there's lots of times when you're aware, and you don't know it, you're too busy thinking about things and too busy doing things and eating and whatever you do, to, to notice that you're being aware while you do them. But you know, your all your waking hours, you know, you're taking in, you're aware your people can see they see people hear can hear and people can, can feel with their body and smell and taste and all these things. And so it might be useful to think of what we're doing with awareness practice, setting up for awareness, is we're not doing awareness, rather worse, or establishing ourselves setting up so we can be close to awareness, we can recognize it, we can attend to it, it's already here. It's not something you have to make happen. But you want to bring yourself close attend to it. Recognize that you're aware, recognize that awareness is already here. And when and I suspect that your sense of what you're doing internally, is different. If you're recognizing you're aware, as opposed to, I'm going to be aware. For me, at least in my vocabulary, being or I'm going to be aware, sounds like work, I'm going to recognize them aware. It's not really work. It's just like, Oh, it's already here. It's supposed to make something kind of exists, that doesn't exist. It's recognizing what's already here. And it seems that in the teachings of the Buddha, that he was more more in that direction. Because there's nowhere that I could find in the teachings of the Buddha, where he gives instructions that people are supposed to do awareness, do mindfulness. But what he says is established mindfulness. Abide in mindfulness, dwell and mindfulness kind of languages that are closer to kind of resting in it, than doing it. And that only makes sense. If awareness is something mindfulness, something, it's already here for us. But this idea of attending or resting in mindfulness is a very different feeling than launching mindfulness or launching awareness or the explosion of awareness. And so, you know, how do these work together.

So setting up for meditation practice. So if you're gonna go do a meditation, I recommend you try to experiment with finding a procedure, a regular procedure, like a ritual that you do that kind of kind of becomes your ritual up seizure, that helps you kind of enter into this arena, this world of being aware in the present moment. So when you go to sit down, make it an intentional act can now I'm going to sit down, this is my time, and sit down in an intentional way. Do mindfulness in movement, mindfulness in action, with a whole movement of sitting down to meditate. There was a time in my meditation that I didn't think that sitting down to meditate was meditation, it was just calling had to do it. And so it kind of plopped down. But if you're intentional about how you sit down, and how you get into your posture, you're already beginning to cultivate attention, you're already beginning to be in the present moment with your experience. And so something as simple and mundane and maybe some seemingly uninteresting, is bringing attention to the process of setting up your posture is actually quite useful. So when you sit down, it takes some time to establish a nice posture, a posture that expresses alertness. And that I think this is particularly something that people sit in chairs have to be careful with. Because in a chair, it's easy to kind of sit down the backrest and just like oh, I've had a busy day, I'm tired, I'm going

to sit here and relax and meditate. Which is fine, it might be good medicine, but it doesn't help you don't you're not availing yourself yourself, of the support that your body can give, for being aware and attentive. So the idea is to set up a posture that lends itself to that expresses an alert body alertness through the body. And you've probably seen the difference between someone who is kind of, you know, slumped in a couch, and someone who sits up straight and is really clear, their alert, you know, says you're really Oh, what's that, it's fun to watch my cat go from, you know, zero to 60 and 10th of a second, if there's a sound outside the house, and happened last night, and suddenly, I mean, the cat because cats can be so limp. You know, as I was completely limp on the floor, and there was a sound, what's that, and then the alertness in the body was quite, you know, kind of beautiful to watch. So can there be sit down and be careful. So the body expresses some kind of alertness. And so people in the back using a backrest, you might have to use it. But there can be attention given maybe microscopic attention to sitting in such a way that the spine feels a little more attentive and alert, then, you know, there's a balance between caring for the back, and maybe having some a lightness in the back as well. When I was at the Zen centers practicing, I had the impression that the longer a Zen practitioner, had been meditating more years they've been done, the longer it took for them to set up their meditation posture. And in fact, there was a Zen Abbot had been teaching the retreat with me last week. And he'd been meditating for 53 years. And I think that he was he took longer to set up his meditation posture, right, than anybody else on the retreat. He also took longer to get out of it. And we'd all had to wait, you know, and he, and he would sway back and forth. It's, you know, just kind of full squat, wonderful to watch. But you know, he'd kind of sway back and forth and kind of get already and adjust his legs and sway some more and adjust his legs. You know, it was a whole process. And, but I don't think it's a coincidence that the longer someone does, then the more time they take and getting into their posture, I think it's part of the process of coming into the moment coming to the experience of the moment, tapping into the our physical capacity for heightened awareness.

Some people think that awareness is just a mental phenomenon. And so it's a matter of kind of just doing something with your mind. But if that's the attitude, it's okay. But you don't then take advantage of the tremendous attentional capacity over our physical body, and how that can be marshaled in us to really be here. And then, and then once we sit down and have a posture that seems to express some alertness I want to say some more about that. I certainly didn't know this. When I was a new meditator, but I've come to appreciate it is that the deepest forms of relaxation that's possible in the body seem to come from having an alert posture. It's kind of counterintuitive, where we think maybe if I'm, if I'm going to relax, I need to just collapse. And just let everything relax. That's true, perhaps, if the body's really stressed, that that's kind of allows for certain kind of surface relaxation. But if you really want to allow for a deep, deep relaxation, you want to sit in a posture that is upright. And then fascinating things begin happening with the posture, there's a way in which certain muscles begin to relax. And it allows other muscles to engage. And as we sit, the shoulders might relax, the belly might relax. But then the spine sometimes begins to stretch upwards, be straighter. And, you know, it's it's kind of it's not necessarily an intentional act, it's more like, the things are coming into harmony. And the energy of concentration begins to develop, and the body begins to sit straighter, and more open. It's quite beautiful. And so this idea, that's all about relaxation, if that's what people think it's about, they're missing out on some of the power of meditation certainly is in relaxation, but it's also the awakening or the arising of energy as well. And this is the explosion part, you know, like, just energy arises and reflects for being to flow through us in a powerful way. And everything gets still learned still there, the mind gets still there, the heart gets still there, and quieter. Anyway, so sitting down and taking good posture. And then it is helpful to beginning to look through the body and see what can be relaxed. Can we can you soften the muscles of the face. I recently read or heard someone give instructions, to let your eyes Be quiet. I love that, when I heard that, wow, that's cool. Quiet eyes. Many people are very active in their eyes. And there are people who are even with our eyes closed are still engaging their

eyes to try to see their meditation, see their breathing or something. But let the eyes Be quiet. And then, you know, soften the face people hold, there's a lot of holding in the face that goes on. Soften around the shoulders. And sometimes I can soft my shoulders, sometimes I have tension in my shoulders, I can't saw I can't relax. But when I can't relax, so don't worry. But I would I like to do is to send a wave of softening around where the tension is. And just this amount, nothing changes, except there's a feeling of softness around it that omit softening the chest, relaxing the belly, it's particularly useful to have a relaxed belly, soft and it's kind of a, in the old days, you know, probably before all of you were born, I think women are supposed to hold the belly in. And I've met women who were, that's what they were trained to do. And it was very hard to untrain themselves from it. But the but to soft belly, it's very unbecoming because you let it fall out and hang down. And so you know, you can so and it took me years to have a soft belly, my meditation, I would relax it, I could relax it, but then it would meet like clench up again, relax, clench up. But it's soft, soft belly, there's something about the softening and letting go. It's a certain mood movement of both letting go and being supported. And then at same time being pushed up in a good posture.

And then the other thing to do to get ready for meditation is to believe in what you're doing. To value and believe in the value of being in the present moment. That being in the present moment with your attention. Being with what's happening here now is a valuable thing to do that for the duration of the meditation, it's the most valuable thing you can do. And it's really helpful to really take time to believe that recognize that think that. Remember that. Because the mind has other ideas. Your mind will think that the past is the most important place because you have to kind of fix the past, have a better past or plan the future. Take care dangers in the future you have to kind of prepare for. It's better to be in fantasy, it's better to be caught up in, you know anything but here and now. But if it's part of you, really acknowledges to yourself, yes. During this time here, my belief, my sense of commitment, my intention is to be awake to what's happening here. And to establish that intention, the beginning of your sitting, can help, it's not going to be, you know, it's not gonna be good enough, you're still going to wander off. But without that clear sense of intentionality. Then when the mind wanders off, part of you believes that your thoughts that you're wandering off to are important, they're useful. But for now, you say, No, not now, this is the time to be here. And now, to be attentive to this here. And remarkable things begin to happen, if you are attentive to what's happening here. And now, I think of awareness is kind of like space, that allows all kinds of things to begin to change and shift and move. If we do it together with an alert posture, and we sit upright, and relaxed. And aware, in the present moment, one of the remarkable things that happens, it's symbolic or representative of other things that can happen is the breathing, can switch over time, become a natural breathing, or say differently, many times in our lives. Our way there, our body's physiology is set up, we're constantly adjusting our breathing, so that we can get more oxygen or, you know, do different things. Be prepared to fight to flight to New York, you know, for for your start doing a lot of physical work, we breathe more heavy, all kinds of breathe is constantly shifting and changing based on the needs that we're in. Based on the stress that we have, based on the emotions we have and the desires we have. And tensions we have been remarkable things happens when we sit down to meditate, and we're not running, we're not exercising, we're not stressed, we're not fighting off the mountain lions. We're just there without reacting to our environment in a balanced, clear way, and the breathing then settles into a kind of a, I call it a natural breathing. That's the kind of the baseline breathing when everything's okay. When there's no problems, no, nothing extra is needed. From the breathing, it doesn't have to be adjusted. And so the breathing that has a wonderful feeling of kind, some people talk about the breathing, breathing itself, this ease and freedom of the breath. And it's kind of nothing just because it's not doing anything or making anything except keeping us alive. But it's just a simple breathing. In that way, the same way, all kinds of things in our physiology in our emotions and our mind also comes to kind of homeostasis comes to kind of a baseline natural state that's deeply satisfying to be this way, where our minds, our emotions, our body is not living in reaction

to things anymore. But rather, is just living just here. And just as the breathing can feel so wonderful when it's just a natural breath breathing itself. So the same thing with a mind. Same thing with thoughts. Same thing with our emotions, some things with our hearts, our whole body, it feels so good to settle into this body, mind and heart. That's not in any kind of reactive mode. They can just say, don't just be here and operate in its own simple way.

And one of the things that can operate is our capacity to be aware. It tends to kind of get stronger and stronger, tends to fill us. I don't know if it's true for everyone, but certainly for me that I don't associate awareness with my brain. I associated awareness with something that radiates out of my whole body, the whole thing I'm just aware and hear. And so it feels like a radiant so it feels like a a sometimes as a strength, sometimes as kind of a boundlessness but it's kind of this energy of just beingness that seems to radiate awareness attention. When the Buddha taught his own son, how to meditate. He also taught him How to prepare for how to set up for his meditation. And he did it by teaching him an attitude, or some attitudes, the attitude for meditation practice. In one way or the other, he gave all kinds of examples for a son. What he was set telling, you should have an attitude of, of equanimity. When you sit down to meditate, attitude that you have space and willingness to allow things to be there, and you're going to be untroubled by what, what occurs. And the idea of kind of sitting down, not only with the idea that now I'm going to be in the present moment, the best I can, this is what's important. But also see if you can establish the idea that now is the time, I'm going to try to be untroubled by anything that occurs in the moment, I'm not going to be in conflict with anything that arises, during the period of time I met my meditation, the mind wanders off, we are untroubled by that. But we do come back. All kinds of emotions come up, we're untroubled by that. We're not in conflict with it. But we do come back to the present moment. There's discomfort in the body, to learn to be untroubled by that, as we sit here, economists. So the idea is to sit down to meditate, establish yourself in a conscious, intentional way. Take time with your body to establish a posture that really is, you know, wants to support you in, in doing the activity you want to do. And then remind yourself that what's important for these minutes that you're going to meditate is, the most important thing you can do is to be in the present moment with your attention. figure out some way to awaken your attention, attend to your attention to find your attention. Come up next to your attention, launch your attention, your awareness, so that it's here with you. And then, in this awareness, have this idea that not easy to do. But he said the idea, the direction you're going is to be untroubled by whatever is happening in the moment. So that awareness is not hijacked, Uranus in that pulled into our conflicts and are being bothered by what's happening in our thoughts. So when the Buddha taught his son meditation, he gave him this attitude of being untroubled or being economists. And he gave a meditation instruction at the end of that instruction. And most of the instruction had to do with mindfulness of breathing. At the end of the instructions, he said something very peculiar for a teenager, he probably was a teenager, but we think about 1314 years old. And he said that if you practice awareness of breathing, and I guess you get good at it, then your last in breath will be known. And your last outbreath will be known. That's a, you know, 13 year old when you die, you'll know your last breath, you'll know your last breath. For the Buddha, it seems like that was a desired goal. There's something about the peacefulness, perhaps, of being fully present for your breathing. That is a wonderful condition for dying. So that's what's anyway, so he ended his little instruction to a son with something about that. Anyway, so I'm going to do the same thing in a different way.

There's a verse in the Dhammapada that goes like this. Attention is the path to the deathless in attention is the path to death. The attentive never die. Those who are inattentive are as if already dead. That's kind of a powerful statement. As if already then, you know, to be asleep, be you know, walk around our life and not really be attentive not really be pay attention is kind of sleepiness kind of cut off or shut off from what's really the real life that was here. Many people think they're alive. But you know,

it's pretty diminished because we're not really present for the lived life as reliving it. And then this idea that the attentive never die. That's kind of like a koan, that's a enigmatic statement that's well worth considering. Of course, we're all gonna die. So it's not meant to be taken literally. But if it's not literal, what does it mean? That if you're attentive, there's something about the process or the activity or the state of being attentive. Where you never die? That is not there. How can that be? What is that the idea of being immortal has been a lifelong, lifelong man, a century long thing that human beings want to be immortal. And there it is, you can be immortal in a certain kind of way. In the field, in your field of your awareness and attention, what is that? What is it that's what can you find in attention, the path to the deathless. So, if you take nothing from this talk, then, but this does feel satisfied. And that is that give care and attention to how you start your meditation. Don't just sit down, plop down, casually, and kind of like get started, you know, with your, whatever you do. Take your time, do it intentionally. kind of have a little routine you do. So you kind of gather yourself you settled in, you're reminded you kind of launched for what you're doing the launching of mindfulness. So those are my thoughts for today. And we have about 10 minutes. And if any of you would like to ask any questions or comments, you're welcome.

I'd be interested in any in any. I'd be interested in any observations about the transition at the other end after meditation getting up from the cushion again. Nice.

So here's one thing I've done, I've done periodically, to great benefit is, to whatever degree you're calmer, after you meditate than you normally would be more peaceful, calmer, even if it just a little bit more than usual. As you come out of meditation, do so carefully and attentively to notice the first moment when you start losing that calm. And if you can catch that moment, stop what you're doing. even sit down again, or in a chair or something. And what just happened? What just happened? What What was it? What What about what what did I believe was so important that I was willing to sacrifice give up my calm for. And if you do that, you'll learn a lot about yourself. And because, you know, if you managed to get 30 seconds out of meditation, one day, one week, one month, and then you get started getting you know, you find out that as soon as you start meditating, you get revved up by your to do list you have to do so much otherwise, otherwise. And so you're like, Okay, I'm not I don't want I don't need to always be a slave to my to do list doesn't help to get revved up. So let's, let's not do that. So then you're able to go 90 seconds and then it's the call this the sacred call of email of texts of the phone. And that's worth sacrifice your calm for right. And, you know, and so, it goes on and on, you know, so it can start stretching it you know, you know just seconds but minutes and hours of exploring where is it you tend to give up and you might learn that you don't have to give up your calm as often as you have. So that's one thing I recommend someone else.

Um, this is kind of a non sequitur, on on what you're talking about, but I recently got brilliant As I wanted to kind of get your opinion on this, I apologize if this has been asked before. But what's your take on the existence of freewill?

What's my take on the existence of free will?

And it seems like there's growing scientific consensus that it's an illusion. And so I was wondering what would your take on that was and what Buddhism says on that time, I

suppose to have a take. I really haven't given much thought it hasn't been very important for me, this idea of free will doesn't something that's been, I seem to have gotten, you know, I've gotten to my old age without having to consider it much. I've managed, you know, I've practiced wonderfully, I'm very happy and freer than I was when I was younger. And I, you know, it's pretty good without having to think about free will. Do you want me to start now? Actually, yeah, you'd love to? Yeah. I think one of the so

it's a kind of it's a peculiar a Western concept that's very important here in the West idea of free will, in. But I think that in terms of doing so, Buddhism tends to be pragmatic. So rather than answering these kinds of questions in the abstract, do we have free will what to take on free will? The question is, to what degree is having the idea of free will and exercising it supportive and helpful, for practice, for moving towards freedom? And it turns out that for many people, it's a more useful concept to guide one's life. The idea that you have free will you have intention that you can act on that not having it? So even if it's an kind of an illusion, of, provisionally, it's a useful illusion to have. And then a time comes in practice, where it's no longer needed, or it's seen as not useful or, or it's actually seen that if Free Will means individual free will like my will, that that doesn't exist, that's kind of an illusion, and at the right time, then that drops away. But don't drop it before it's done. Its work for you. That makes sense. And so the idea, the idea that it's free will is an illusion. is is that, you know, that's just an idea. To live with it until you see that's an illusion. That's wisdom. It makes sense. Does that Do you think that's useful for you?

I think so. Yes.

I'm still pondering. Okay, great. Okay.

Okay. So, thank you. Thank you all for coming and meditating here. And now you're launched. May your mindfulness take you far. Thank you.