

2017-12-31 Reflections On Sustaining Meditation Practice

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SPEAKERS

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So good morning, everyone. And to me, it feels like it's already the New Year. Though I this isn't the last day I guess, of 2017. And I know so many people here today, like what happens with new year's resolutions and people come for a while. So welcome everyone. And kind of also anticipating that people often start a new year with aspirations with intentions, and often is a time to kind of refresh one's commitment to various things. Not a few people become interested in their Buddhist practice and meditation practice, and would like to find some way to engage it more seriously or more regularly than they usually do. With the new year and kind of fresh start. And with that idea, I thought I would talk today about some of the ways to sustain a practice. Because that actually is meditation practice, and especially mindfulness is actually a very easy thing. What's difficult is to continue doing it. And to keep it up and sustain it both, you know, over the minutes in which we meditate, but also through a year through life. And so one of the ways to support to help us sustain it and keep it going. So a few things about this is I want to first say more personally, that it's been one of the greatest blessings of my life, to have this practice and to be to the degree to which I've been able to practice, it's unimaginable to me how my life would be without it certainly would have been radically different. And so I feel very grateful to have had the chance to do so much of it and engage and keep it going for now for over 40 years. And, you know, it's knowing what a blessing it can be, what benefits can come from it. It's, I'm very inspired to support other people in tasting, touching into some of that as well. So that's a little bit behind giving this talk in thinking about this topic, as to things that the Buddha said and that maybe are pertinent. One is he said that what he teaches, is for people who feel that kind of a very peculiar statement for people who feel. And he put a tremendous emphasis on direct experience, much more so than beliefs and ideas. And it's possible to read Buddhist books and learn the ideas of Buddhism. But that's very different from feeling that they're feeling into it and feeling into oneself. And that the practice is meant for people who take the time, or have the ability or the interest to really feel deeply what's going on in this life feel into themselves into their lives. So the Dharma is for those who feel. And so the idea of taking time to really feel to be interested in feeling ourselves, feeling down into the depths of ourselves. So what's really going on is part of what this is about. The other thing he said is that my his teaching, is that it's a teaching of action. And so it's not a passive practice we do. It's a teaching, it's an active practice, even though part of the activity of practice is to sit still in meditation, it's still understood to be an active engagement and engagement to wake up to be present to be attentive engagement, the activity to help us release the stress we have the to release all the extra swirling and twirling and agitation we have in our mind, the mind gets very still and very peaceful. But it's an action which brings us that it's a way of being and so I say that is because one of the actions is to meditate. The Buddhist practice is not wishful thinking. One of the maybe irritating things I like to say is that Buddhist practice doesn't work. I pause And then I'll say, unless you do it.

So big, you know you, there's people, including myself at times where I kind of thought I was doing it or kind of was complaining about my practice. And then I realized I wasn't really doing it I wasn't applying I was engaged. So the Dharma is to feel deeply, and the Dharma is to be engaged. So how do we engage it? And how do we sustain it? One of the ways is to understand, have a clear sense of how it is important, or a clear sense of what is important for us, what's really valuable for us in our lives. And I think this question of what we most value, what's the most important is something that is very helpful to keep close to ourselves and to keep asking, day after day, month, after month, year after year, because it changes over time. So we can kind of there's, there's deeper and deeper layers of to discover what's most important, what's most valuable. And for people who feel, to feel deeply into oneself, and really kind of, you know, not stay at the idea level, not stay at the idea of desires, because so many our desires are surface desires, but to really drop down to what maybe can be called aspirations, or what is the heart's deepest intention, and what's most important. And then how does meditation practice fit into that, I think that's a lot easier to sustain a meditation practice, if we have a clear sense that this somehow is connected to what is most important for us. If it's not connected to what's most important, then perhaps we shouldn't do it. Because we have in our human life is very important. And in some sense, we don't have much time. And you don't want to waste it doing things which are not related to what is most important. And so, but if you can really feel the connection between what's most important than meditation, then it's easier to want to do it and, you know, be committed to doing it. So to reflect on that for oneself, really think about that for a while. That's very helpful. Now, in terms of what Buddhism traditionally says, is that one of the most important things is to find a life where we don't suffer. And a life we don't cause intentionally cause suffering and harm in the world around us. That this is an ethical direction, that somehow the Buddha didn't word use the word ethics in the way that the English word Exactly. But the Buddhist teachings is profoundly ethical. Over and over again, the focus is on how we live a good life, how we live a life that doesn't cause harm to self or others, and how we cause live a life that is for the welfare of self and others. And that, you know, how is that important? as is, one of the things that characterizes the Buddhist teachings is that it's not a theistic Li based, there were plenty of Gods in the pantheon of India at the time of the Buddha. But these gods were a little bit relegated to,

to, or they called inactive and kind of, you know, big players in the side, supporting roles, thank you. Yes, they're supporting roles are not actually that important. And so one of the things that happens in philosophy, for example, is that when, when different philosophers in times of Greece, time of the Enlightenment in Europe, and modern world and psychology, when people don't have gods to rely on or a religious authority from, you know, God given books to rely on for what is true, what humans tend to come to, is something that can be called more like. One person calls it the pleasure principle. But the idea of using our own way of experiencing our own ability to feel deeply, what is painful and what is pleasant, pleasant, what is what is experientially a deep sense of happiness, peace, and what is suffering and agitation and lack of peace. And this ability, this, to have that as a fundamental orientation and guide Let guide for how we live our lives is what the Buddha offers. And it would seem that it's a little bit hedonistic to have this kind of emphasis. But there is no other good basis, if you're using empirical experience, for really finding your way to what's really deep and profound, and this question of using, you know, tuning into what is welfare and what is not, becomes more and more subtle. As you go deeper and deeper into meditation, we get to see how the subtlety of the mind how it works. And we get to see the compass, of moving forward, away from suffering away from the causes of suffering, moving towards the, the causes of happiness and well being gets more and more subtle and profound, and more and more sublime, more and more satisfying, in a very deep way. And at some point, it can feel like nothing else, is more important about a hot where to come from where to live in ourselves, than the deeps, deep, satisfying sense of well being, and the motivation to work for the welfare of self and for others. So anyway, this is kind of, in Buddhist point of view, this is can be understood as being bad,

and what's most important. And meditation practice supports this, because it gives us the first hand evidence, the first hand information we need, in order to follow this path, away from suffering and towards welfare and well being. So it's not a matter of looking at the books and learning principles and learning ethical rules, learning someone else's idea of what you should, should do, and all that. But rather, it's the meditation is the way of reading the book and oneself and discover for oneself how this is done. And to do it well enough so that we have come have real confidence that this has profound value for ourselves and for others, to have discovered some depth of peace and depth of stillness or depth of freedom from being caught up in the reactivity that people often caught up in. So that's least from the Buddhist point of view. But if you might have your own understandings and ideas of why meditation is important, or how it fits into your life. But reflect on that is one of the ways to have the kind of the intellectual support for sustaining the practice. The second thing that helps is once you understand how meditation is important, is to be inspired to do it, to have not only to kind of know what's important for yourself, but to have a degree of trust, or faith, or inspiration or enthusiasm for doing it. And so what is it that gives you enthusiasm? What is it that gives you faith or inspiration? How can you tap into sources of inspiration or faith or trust, so that you have greater trust in the value for example of meditating every day, then you would perhaps checking google news every day. Greater trust meditating every day, than watching TV, greater trust and meditation than many of the things that people do in a day life, which may be if they're you put them on a scale of what's most important than what's most valuable. Maybe some of the things we do, but don't really hold up on the scale.

So, so where do we put our trust? What do we what are we inspired to do in our lives? And how can we tap into a place of inspiration or faith is also one of the tasks I think that are very helpful, helpful to consider. So some of you it might be listening to Dharma talks. It's like I find it phenomenal. Because I didn't grow up this way. In Buddhism, that there are these taught these apparently, these talks online, that people can listen to. Apparently, I said, because I still don't listen to talks online. And then there's this place called audio Dharma that people keep referring to. But you know, I hardly know how to navigate Believe it or not, probably pretty simple to do it. I haven't figured out how to download a talk from Dharma onto my, onto my smartphone, because I never do it. And so but you know, it's anyway, so but people listen to these talks. And, you know, other talks, other teachers, and I think it's, it's been, you know, kind of a delight for me to see the inspiration, support that listening to Dharma talks can have for people. The reading books used to be so thing people did to get into it to get inspired. Knowing other practitioners coming to groups like this, and perhaps there's people here who you've seen how they practice and see their demeanor and how they are, and inspires you that someone practices for a while, that there's something about them that say, Oh, yeah, this is good, I want to do this. Then, related to all this is also a sense of purpose, to be your intention. And this is related, of course, to what's important and what inspires us. I think of it a little bit different than intention or sense of purpose is what's going to engage us what we want to do, how we want to do it. And I think that spending time really asking yourself what's important, and what's my intention is maybe more important than meditating every day. If you did those two things every day. You know, I think it would clarify a lot. I did this for quite a while in my life. In my early years of practice, I would spend every day some time every day, considering what is my deepest intention for today. And some days I had the same answer. But what was interesting over the days, it was how it shifted and changed. And sometimes I started discovering that I would get to a certain kind of thing, I thought, This is my deepest intention for today. And then I would say, well, let's keep thinking about it and reflecting on it. And then I dropped deeper and deeper. One of the interesting things I discovered was that if I ask myself, what is my deepest intention? And my answer was stated in the negative, then I wasn't deep enough. So for example, if I said, Oh, my deepest intention is to live without fear. That's a great intention. I'm certainly want to support anybody who has that that wish. But that's a negative statement, right? So the way to take it further, one way is to say, ask, if you could live without fear, what then would be your intention? And

like, for me, I've asked people there sometimes, and some people will come back and say, oh, then I would love. But once they say it, love is a deeper intention, rather than being for your fear, then sometimes they can shift their focus to the underlying impetus to love and that becomes the sun that melts the fear. So rather than having to deal always with the fear directly, sometimes if you go deeper and deeper, there's something deeper somehow somehow that can resolve these issues. Another thing that supports doing meditation practice regularly, is time is time. Time. I know I want to say time management. But because when people have a Sabbath, how think that's time management. They know the Sabbath is kind of an idea of they have rest, sacred day of rest, but to give ourselves time, to meditate time for a mindful life. Because the momentum, the movements of our inner life, learning to touch into it learn to settle the quiet. The active agitated thinking mind, it takes time. This whole meditation practice in a certain kind of way, is not very efficient. You know, we would like to I mean, now Nowadays, there are people who are trying to make it much more efficient. And maybe they will, maybe in a few, you know, there'll be better ways to meditate than just sitting down by oneself and closing one eyes. I mean, there's people who there's, there's apps now and there's devices and all kinds of things that speed. And there's it used to be back my days before there was, you know, brain machines that people put on their heads and apps and all that. We had a less more technologically simple way of speeding it up. It was called like, you know, maybe LSD.

But most people who, you know, went through that phase that stopped doing it and found that there was maybe guys it's time but you know, this you know, some actually more valuable not to do it. And, but there's something very, I believe, very important about doing the inner work that's required, if we use nothing to extra to support us in the practice. But we really have to face ourselves directly. To use a drug to use some kind of other device. There's all kinds of now there's, you know, many years I've been on this doing this practice practices, and I've gone through all kinds of workshops and different things over the years. And there's some fantastic techniques, they can get you concentrated really fast, and get your high really fast without drugs, without machines, there's things that can be done. But I don't think that and they're, I wouldn't say I wouldn't say they're not valuable, they have their place. But I think what's, what I put my put value in is not bypassing the work of sitting down quietly, and facing one selves, being with what's here, not trying to get away from a quickly not trying to fix it quickly, not trying to avoid what's here. But it takes time to feel and to be here and in the slow, seemingly inefficient way. Learn to really work with and see and resolve and heal and dissolve some of the deeper complexes, some of the deeper cause issues that are going on in our lives, that, that help us become mature practitioners, people have the ability to sit quietly, and look the monsters right in the face, the ability to be present in middle and the difficulties of life, and be still alert and present engaged, without needing to go reach for something else to clean them out and solve our issues for us. So time, give ourselves time, take the time. Make sure when you meditate, that you don't do it in a hurry. Today, I'm going to meditate for 10 minutes, and I'm going to know, nail it in 10 minutes. And then move on to the next thing. But to sit down with it, even if even if you have only 10 minutes to meditate, to sit down with a sense during those 10 minutes, that you're giving yourself infinite time. This is a time time to have time and not feel like you're in a hurry. And one of the reasons for this is the feeling or the idea or the sense of I'm in a hurry to be in a rush is more mental activity. And what we're trying to do is to calm the surface mental activity, so we can really see what's going on more deeply. So to be in a hurry is actually going in the wrong direction. The other thing that helps us sustain practice is to have support. I can confidently say that if I did not have support from other practitioners and the teachers I've had over these years, I would not have practiced for this long. And I would not have grown as much as I'd have through the practice. It's you know, I didn't realize that at the time and the first decade or so of my practice. But when I look back, I realized that without the support and the encouragement, and the modeling that I received, without the sitting together with other people in groups, I wouldn't have done it. Some people can do it that way on their own as hermits, it takes a lot of strength of character to do it

and learn termination. I probably didn't have it when I first started practicing. So I was really dependent on support from other people. And I still feel to this day that I'm I don't know if support is the right word, but I'm certainly am. So maybe support, it's okay. I'm supported by the inspiration I get when I practice with other people. When I come down here time, see like on Sunday morning and meditate with all of you. It's a different feeling than when to meditate at home. And I like meditating quietly home alone. That's no problem. But, but they notice to be together as a group to feel the intentionality to feel the dedication to feel the interest to be in a room of other people being still I just makes me so happy that it makes me want to just do more of it or, you know, it gives me more inspiration to continue doing it. It's a great thing. So practicing with others, for some people is a tremendous support.

I know some people who like coming to sit in group like here Sunday morning, at least one you know once a week because it kind of gives them a boost and then through the rest of the week. They can keep inspired to keep sitting and practicing. And in some people, I think even don't feel Yes, I sit at home, and I'm calmer. And we're still because you know, it's what people close the doors loud here, and people walk across the wooden floor with their heavy boots and clump around, and then they take off their Velcro jackets. And, you know, all kinds of wonderful things here that goes on. And so some people, you know, feel that, yes, you know, it's quieter at home. However, I To be honest, it's still fact that I was here has given me a boost. And now I'm much more likely to keep practicing and at home, it's inspiring or meaningful in some way. Another thing that supports ongoing practice, is to be careful and be attentive to the attitudes you bring along, in your practice. You overly idealistic, some people sit down, and they expect to get into deep concentrated states in 10 minutes. Or they expect that, you know, enlightenment is just around the corner. And you know, you know, I've been meditating now for a week, and, you know, it's what's wrong. And so sometimes there's too, people are too idealistic, and in doing that, or too high expectation of what's supposed to happen too quickly. And so then they get disappointed. And they give up, or they say, well, maybe another day is better, or maybe, you know, that didn't work today, but I'll read a book and maybe learn about different meditation practice and try that and not realizing that it's, it's, this is a slow unfolding, the Buddha called it a gradual path. And there's something very maturing about just giving yourself time. And also the idea of being too idealistic. Living for ideals, it's a, it's a, often a way of not really taking the time to feel what is actually happening. And what's actually going on here. And there's a little slogan, if there's a gap, between the ideal and what is actual, choose the actual, is there in terms of the mindfulness, in terms of what you pay attention to really study the actual be with it to be present for it, see what's going on, get to the bottom of it, sense it, find your freedom with it. Try not to be too ambitious, or too conceited. In doing the practice, there's plenty of people who, you know, have strong ambition. in the, in the, you know, 40 years ago, when I started practicing, there was competitive meditation. I remember I hadn't seen, I was so silly. When I was, we would have these, one of the one of the ways that I got caught up in this kind of competitive idea of meditation was, we would sometimes have this, we were in the monasteries, we would do this, you know, we'd meditate in the evening. And sometimes there was this optional, required late night sitting that had no Bell, that ended it. So you're supposed to sit there, and then when you were ready, you can go to bed. And this, you know, optional required sitting everyone was there. And then, you know, who was going to go to bed first? Who was going to be the slacker who was going to be the one who would you know, you know, wouldn't you know? And so, I would sit there sometimes think, Well, I'm not going to go to bed and before that person does. And he's I'm a better a better meditator, because I'm going to stay here. This is what I'm thinking my mind, right? I'm a good meditator, because I'm going to sit here and not go until that person goes and that person should go, can't they go? What's wrong? what's what's wrong with them, they're not really meditating. Who's not really meditating? It was me. So, you know, no competitive meditation.

It also doesn't work very well to compare oneself with other people. We certainly can contrast herself or learn from the example of other people, but to compare ourselves and our value as a meditator by what other people are experiencing or doing is not really the point of it all. The point is, to wake up to feel to be with how it is for you. And what it is for you is very important to yours important. Your experience in life is important and it's so important that you don't want to try to have somebody else's experience. Your path is your path through your own kind of way. So no need to compare yourself, somebody else is getting concentrated on not someone else's getting calm, and I'm not someone else's, whatever. The idea is to keep eat, be very careful with those kinds of attitudes, because those attitudes can be discouraging. And so people then will, you know, stop practicing. The other thing that I had to learn early in my practice, was to be careful with attitudes of being lazy, or complacent. There were times where I would just kind of like, you know, I'll get to it. You know, this is important, yes, and you know, just a little bit later in the day, and then later would come, yeah, I'll get to it later in the day. And now it's night that I'm tired, I don't think this is a good time to meditate. Let's try tomorrow. So there was an accessory I had certain kind of laziness or complacency that sometimes would settle in that, that undermine my practice. And so I had to learn a certain degree of self discipline to keep showing up. And one of the great lessons that I had was that at some point, I realized that when I was meditating alone, without a group of people, I realized that the discipline had to come from inside of me, because one of the nice things about sitting with a group of people, the discipline is supported by other people. You know, we sit here, you know, sometimes 35 minutes, sometimes 45 minutes. Some people find they can do it that length here at IMC, but they don't really feel like they can do it well at home, they don't have the discipline for it, or it seems like too long of a stretch. But at some point, I realized for myself that with whatever sense of complacency, resistance, laziness that I had, that I had to awaken and develop a certain degree of discipline that didn't have earlier that had to rely on myself. And that was invaluable for me to be able to stay in the practice. And I suspect I don't remember so well back 40 years ago now. But I just I kind of suspect that I had a certain feeling of indignation, or that I had to do that. That the you know, I shouldn't have to work so hard. And so another interesting way of reflection for sustaining the practice, is to give time, about how you're going to fit the practice into your life. So be intentional about it. Look at your life, look at what's important. And really kind of figure out where does it fit so that I want it, I can do it regularly. Some people it really works to do it first thing in the morning, some people absolutely doesn't work to do it, then it works to do in the evening. Some people I've known have had the most success doing it regularly to do it during the lunchtime. Some people at the end of the day, and they come home before the evening kind of begins. There's different times different ways in which it fits in. Some people, you know have to do well, at IMC, we sit for 3545 minutes. So I need to do that at home. But that doesn't fit into the life that lots of kids and work or whatever. But what might work is 15 minutes. So we do 15 minutes. It's better that than not do it at all. So to really reflect little metal, how does it fit? How can I make it fit in a realistic way? So it's sustainable? And then there's the flipping that question around, which can be quite powerful.

So instead of asking, how does the practice, how's the practice going to fit into my life? It's possible to ask the question how my life fit into the practice. And why that's powerful is that it gives priority to the practice. And for some people, or maybe it's something you discover over time. It's kind of like, practice is the most important part of being alive. practices, the essence of practice is really what we want to orient or live our life around. In my practical life, my ordinary kind of activities of life, need to fit into that having a job having taken care of things, all things that you know, that's those are going to be support for something which is deep and more valuable, which is the practice. So for some people, it comes to that point where practice becomes the most important thing and the question then is how does a life fit into that? And then a few more things I'll say kind of quickly. regularity of practice is important. By practicing record regularly, there can be momentum, we kind of settle into a groove, so becomes easier and easier. If we don't have a regular practice, then you know, we don't do it for a few days, then maybe I should do it. But you know, but after you do it regularly is no question. This is what I do. Kind of like

brushing your teeth, I hope for you that, you know, you don't think about needing to brush your teeth, you just do it at the time before you go to bed or something. So you get up in the morning and you're set because that's what you do. There's no question, there's no negotiations, because it's a regular part of life. Not too idealistic, perhaps, and maybe a little more realistic. One wonderful technique that I've heard some people use is to meditate six times a week, but not necessarily six days. So it means that you're committed to meditating six times a week, somebody gives you one day off if you want. But if for some reason, life circumstances come along, and make it hard to do it regularly, day after a day. That's okay, because then you make it up. And next day, you do two days two times meditation. So you didn't do it on Wednesday. So you remember that. So come Saturday, when you have more time, then you make up for it. So some people have that find that kind of regularity helpful. Patience. I think that without discovering how to be patient, I think most people are not going to find their way with meditation, it's probably one of the first lessons is to be patient. It helps to have integrity. Buddhism puts a tremendous of importance on ethical integrity, as the foundation for meditation, perhaps it helps us not be agitated, it helps us to not have regrets and remorse that we don't want to sit and have to deal with and be present for. And some people avoid meditation because it's a way that their their lack of integrity will catch up to them. Someone says the unresolved or challenging issues of our life will eventually catch up to you if you meditate regularly. That's a good thing to have to have that happen. And then the final thing I'll say that, that I think is a tremendous support for sustaining the practice is to bring in, sprinkled in some modicum of love. So to have some modicum of love for oneself, love for others love for the world, to have somehow the context in which we do this practice. be one of care, compassion, love, kindness. Because then it starts becoming more automatically rewarding to do it or nourishing to do it. And love is not always easy to have. But to consider that it has a role and a place in supporting the practice. And in supporting us to be mindful and present. Maybe we can tap into it or revoke it or find it more often than you would if you didn't have that thought. Where's the love? Where's love and illness? Where is love in being mindful? Where's mindfulness and being loving.

And one of the surprises for me and these years that I practiced mindfulness is at some point, I couldn't tell a difference between mindfulness and love. For a long time I could, but at some point they seem to come together. And the very act of being mindful, came with as a as a form of love. The verity of love came with mindfulness and two became inseparable. So those are ways that maybe for this coming year, will sustain your practice afford it. And if it's your intention to have meditation practice or mindfulness be a regular part of this 2018 then I hope that some of these ideas today will inspire you or fuel you or kind of keep you going. And perhaps coming time see or other groups and isn't it way that you'll be sustained and supported through the year. May you have all the support you need, so that your practice is sustained. It's for the welfare of yourself and the welfare of the world. May it be that your practice is coming year is beneficial for the world that you live in. May all beings be happy. Thank you all.