

Agency

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So good morning, everyone. Can you hear me okay? Is it loud enough, everyone? Yeah? Okay. So I'd like to offer some thoughts, reflections on the topic of agency. It's a topic that for another program that I'm thinking about these days. So, and then agency in a spiritual life, agency in particularly for a Dharma life. How did these come together?

And one of the reasons for this is that sometimes in doing meditation practice, doing a Buddhist practice, spiritual life, people don't feel they have the ability to do it. So in that sense, they feel that there's no agency. And if they sometimes they do feel they have the ability to do it, and maybe they don't think they have agency, but in a way that they do, sit down to meditate, they can go on retreats, they can spend time maybe reading spiritual books. And it's very meaningful part of their life. So to introduce this topic some more, in the very important teaching in, in insight work and mindfulness practice, Buddhist mindfulness practice, is a teaching that whatever experience you're directly having in the present moment, so you have to be really clear, like whatever you're feeling, sensing, experiencing in the present, can be distinguished or divided or distinguished as having three tones, three feeling tones. It can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

And for some people, they find it phenomenally fascinating and helpful to just see and recognize that that's the case, because something can be amazingly complex, like some kind of social drama that you're involved in, maybe, you know, at a holiday party, and boy, there's a lot going on here, and it's difficult, and social dynamics are, ancient and difficult and, you know. And then in the middle of that, well, Buddha said there's a feeling tone to the experience. And so what's the feeling tone of this holiday event? It's unpleasant. And suddenly the whole complexity of it has been simplified enough that when you say, oh, I know how to be with things that are unpleasant, I'll breathe, I'll slow down, I'll be mindful of the unpleasant and find my stability, my grounding again. So it's a way of kind of finding yourself stable

again or finding some kind of stability, some kind of context for how to be by just kind of seeing it, oh, this is part of it and I can just, if I don't see it's unpleasant, then I'm kind of reacting to it perhaps.

Because sometimes our inner life is reacting to, you know, amoeba-like to our experience. It isn't necessarily that we're reacting to all the things we have opinions about in the room in this holiday event. But something about just, it's just unpleasant for us how we experience it. And that's what we don't like. And so as soon as you say it's unpleasant, it changes the orientation of how we understand it, how we see it. And it might be much more easy to then engage wisely in the event that you're a part of. So this thing I do, dividing things into these three feeling tones can be very helpful.

But in this mindfulness tradition, there's a second distinction that's made. Within the category of feeling tones, there are two general areas of feeling tones that we can have. One is in relationship to the outer world, and the other is to the inner world. And that's kind of my language. It doesn't quite work out in all ordinary ways of saying inner and outer. And, but for now, you know, so outer certainly is that, you know, there's the feeling tone of, of being so delighted that I won the lottery, or delighted that it's, you know, that it's sunny outside, or, you know, happy that you know, that I was praised. Wow, that was pretty good. I like that. That feels pleasant. Oh, and then we get criticized and that's unpleasant and, you know, and that affects us and changes our mood quite quickly.

And so things can happen in the outer world that we take in and somehow register in ways that are pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. And then there's the inner world. And these are things that can bubble up from the inside that really in and of themselves have nothing to do with the outside world. So, and this is why it's where the sharp line doesn't quite work out. Because if you're spending your inner world is waiting for the lottery to be run for the lottery ticket, And you're sure you're going to win. And you're already planning your vacations and your mansions and your, all the kind of, you know, recreational activities you'll be doing. And you're just so delighted and happy. That's, in an ordinary sense, that's coming from the inside, your thoughts and ideas and all that. But it still belongs to the operating system that's oriented to the world around us.

We have a different operating system within that is really deep inside. And I like to call it the Dharmic operating system. Someone else might call it a spiritual operating system. Someone else might call it the heart. Some people might call it the soul. Some people might call it the inner spirit. There's all these kind of languages. There's something inside, maybe, that belongs to a different operating system than our desires and aversions to what's happening

in the world and what could happen in the world and what we can get from the world or not get from the world, that can exist there independent of what's happening in the world.

You go to that holiday party that's so complicated and kind of unpleasant on that surface level, but you've had this really good meditation before you went. And it's like, you know, you've never been so centered and equanimous and calm. And you're like, it's like, you're like feeling like this happy way, kind of like you're inside the car, going through the car wash. And going to the holiday party, you know, like, wow, wow, look at all this craziness here. Wow, you know, but you feel like you're not getting wet, you know, he's not touching you because you have this deeper wellspring of something, another source where you're living in. And then maybe at this holiday party, they serve really, a lot of really good chocolate cake and coffee, And you have, you know, a lot of it. And pretty soon that deeper spiritual operating system no longer is operating. And it's been taken over by a whole other kind of way of being and that's now is kind of like completely interacting or buffeted around by what's happening at the party. So you can lose it.

But there's a steeper operating system, and I call it the Dharmic operating system. And that can feel very wholesome. It can feel very integral to who we really want to be. It can feel like now we're really centered on ourself in a deep, peaceful way. It's a place of inner peace, inner well-being, inner authenticity, inner integrity, inner wholeness that we can experience. And so, and so the Buddha, when he talked about this kind of Dharmic operating system inside, it can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant or unpleasant. So how does that work? It can be pleasant, if we're really having the inner, the wholesomeness and the goodness and the joy and the happiness of that inner Dharmic operating system flowing through us. It can be unpleasant when it's not and we don't have the agency to do the practice.

So this inner operating system is practice dependent initially as we are kind of finding our way with it in Buddhism. And so it might be the only way a person has access to it is to meditate. Or maybe they can tap into it by going for a long, long hike in a nature preserve and be quiet for a while. And then they feel like they touch into something. But somehow their life doesn't allow them to do either. Maybe, which I knew very well, maybe they have young kids at home. And I found it hard to meditate when my kids were really babies and quite young at home. And luckily, I had to meditate for work. So that was helpful. Or maybe you're caring for a family member or a parent or someone who's quite sick and elderly. And I know I had my mother live with us for a while when she had dementia. That took a lot of time and effort and wasn't much time for other things. Or there's responsibility of work. There's responsibility of all kinds of things that we might have. Or there can be this worldly responsibilities we have

might keep us from touching into something that's valuable for us. And so there's a sense of lack. There's something unpleasant there. in this deeper operating system. It feels like a deeper place of, sometimes they call it, the most extreme versions of it, they call it dark night of the soul.

I had that period, a short period, because my whole life when I was young, at some point, it became really important to be able to go on a long meditation retreat. I'd come to a point in my life, kind of a dead end, all the different ways I'd gone. That was the only way forward that I knew. And the ability to do that was being frustrated. And so I kind of like, you know, something inside of me really felt this like, oh, I don't have, I can't follow through on what's most important for me. In a sense, I had no agency to do what was most important. The circumstances around me got in the way. And so this inner operating system can be inspiring and it can be discouraging or depressing or deflating if we can't have access to it and practice with it.

And at some point if people have been introduced to Buddhist practice and meditation, There can be inside, to use a Christian term, a call to do more of it. In Buddhism we call it an onward leading. feeling that, oh, there's a pull or a slide I'm on and I just want to take that slide and keep going. There's a door opening up and I want to keep doing it. There's an inspiration, there's a flow that wants to happen here and I have to make room for that flow to keep going. Or there's an inner growth that's happening and I want to let that growth happen but in order to do that, all I know how to do is to meditate. Or maybe you do some meditation and at some point you feel, a wonderful thing, a moment in meditation is when you keep doing it and at some point you feel that inner operating system say, I really want to do this. Like there's an inner call or an inner momentum that this is what I want to do, you know, now. You know, this is the most valuable, this is what's important. As opposed to, you know, I should meditate, I'm supposed to meditate, I want to meditate, I know it's good for me, and I just can't get to it. And at some point something shifts, and it's more like, you know, I know, I know I'm supposed to vacuum the living room rug. But I'm meditating. I want to meditate. I know I'm supposed to do some things, but this is what the pull is.

And it's kind of like, and this may be a very unfortunate example, but you have to forgive me and also to reword it for yourself. It's kind of like, you know, at some point you have to go pee. And it's just like, this is what has to happen. At some point, there can be that feeling like, now I have to meditate. Like, oh, this is what should happen. This is the most meaningful thing I can do. And so, in that regard, at some point, people can have a feeling that I want to go on retreat. And I had that when I was young. I was meditating for a while, for a couple of years.

And at some point, I think I was meditating daily for about a year. And I decided that I wanted to go on retreat. There was a call. Something about meditation felt good and right. It just felt good to kind of follow through on it and see what a week of meditation would do in terms of allowing this nice opening that was happening to have a fuller chance to keep opening. So I signed up for a retreat, a week-long retreat. And then about a couple of weeks before the retreat started, I called the retreat center and said, something has come up and I can't go. And they said, okay, we'll just take you off. That was easy, I thought. What had come up was fear.

So the thing that was interfering with my desire, my inner impulse to kind of follow through on this, what was happening on the inside, was myself. It wasn't responsibilities out in the world, it was actually I was afraid. And so sometimes what interferes with our agency is not responsibilities and circumstances around us, but rather it's what's inside of us. And so we might be afraid. We might be afraid of what's going to happen to us. We might be afraid it's going to change our life too much. We might be afraid of what we're going to have to face and see if I slow down and really look at myself. Anyway, so I chickened out of my first retreat. And my karma of that is that I have to be a dharma teacher. And so then at some point then about a Probably about a year later, a year later, I ended up going on a week-long retreat. And I thought that was really great to do it. It was really, it was life-changing for me to be there. But by the time it was over after the week, it was okay. That was great, but I'm not doing this again for a while. It just felt, you know, it just required so much energy and intensity or something of me. And And so then gradually, over the next months, after six months, there came the call. Something inside of me said, okay, now I'm ready. I want to do this again. And I did it. And when I finished that week, it was good. No more, not for a while. And I continued my daily meditation practice. And then about six months later, the call came again. I felt now I'm ready to go. And luckily for me, at that point, I didn't have the inner inhibition. I didn't have the fear anymore. Now I was able to follow through. And at some point, following through meant to go further into Buddhism. and then further into it. And so I went to live at a Zen center, I went to live at a Zen monastery. And then as I went along, this inner call of this spiritual operating system, just kind of became the primary organizing principle for how to live my life. It took me to Asia, it took me to become a monk in Burma, you know, and eventually brought me here to do this, what I'm doing now as a life.

And so this inner call, now it's easy for people to hear my story and my ability to be able to as a young person to just keep answering that call and go to retreat, go to live at a center, go to a monastery, go to Asia. Some people can't do that. It's inconceivable that they're

going to do that as a young person because maybe now you're no longer young. And so now I can't do that. That's not available to me. And, but luckily, the, it's not necessary to do that for this practice. The primary orientation that Buddha gave for finding our way with this dharmic operating system, to find the pleasure of it, the delight, the satisfaction of it, where we can find our agency is, in being able to recognize what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. And the wholesome here means that which really speaks to and awakens or nourishes this inner operating system, the inner goodness, the inner sense of wholeness or integrity or peace or sense of the spirit or the soul. It's not exactly so clear exactly how to name it or describe it, this thing that's deeper, except that it's something which is not dependent on what's happening in the world. It's not dependent on the lottery or praise or criticism. It's not dependent on whether you're living in an endless holiday party. that goes on forever and ever. You can find your peace in whatever difficulty situation you have. It's difficult to do that. It takes time and effort and practice, but it is possible to find the wholesome within you, even if the world outside of you is mostly unwholesome.

And so the Buddha said, You can practice the wholesome. If I didn't think you could do it, I wouldn't tell you to. You can avoid the unwholesome. If I didn't think you could do it, I wouldn't tell you to avoid the unwholesome. So that's what, the whole, all of what he has to teach is reduced to that statement. That he believes in, that we have agency. He believes that we have the capacity to act and do what we need to do for this purpose. And maybe not go off to Asia to practice and be a monastic. Maybe not do long retreats. Maybe not do any retreats. Maybe you can't even meditate because of the circumstances you have. But even so, you can do the wholesome. You can avoid the unwholesome.

Once you start getting the hang or some sense that there is an inner life, there is a life of the heart, there is a life of In some Buddhist circles, they wouldn't refer to the heart as being the locus for this. They would say it was in the belly. Which is maybe some people find that kind of odd. But it's even deeper in us than what we call the heart maybe in modern English. And so this deep source within. And how do we find it? we can find it. And the sense of agency that it's up to us is encapsulated in this very, very powerful poem in the *Dhammapada*. I think it's powerful. Let's just paraphrase it. It says something like, the Buddha merely points the way. It's up to you to walk it. The Buddha just explains what you could do, but he can't do it for you. Someone can tell you where the bathroom is, but you know what you have to do. Only you, you know, for yourself, can go to it, go find it, right? So the Buddhas only point the way, it's for you to practice it. And so the Buddha believes that we have agency. He believes there's a reference point within us that we can follow. It's not about reading books. It's not

about listening to Dharma talks, but little bits okay. And it's not about, and in some ways it's not even about what you do. Which is a little odd, since that's what the topic of the talk is. But really, it's what you do with this inner life. Do you pause enough? Do you pay attention enough to notice? What's the quality of your inner life? What are the characteristics? What does it feel like inside? Or are you too distracted to notice? Or is your mind spinning with thoughts and you would say, well, I'm mostly just agitated and spinning in my thoughts. Yes, that's might be true, but if you identify that as a center of your life, you get one answer. But if you can go underneath those spinning thoughts and the churning and fantasies and ideas and judgments and commentary and really drop down deep, what do you find there? And what we find there is not always good. What we find there is not always pleasant. It's not always so easy to be there because it can be very uncomfortable. But that is where we can start finding what is wholesome. Now that I feel how I am, the quality of my inner life, how can I meet that in a wholesome way? How can I relate to it? Almost like, how can I be my own friend? How can I have compassion for that? How can I have care for that? And that is beginning to act, engage in the wholesome life. You have to have some agency. when you touch into the difficulty within. You have to call on agency, call on your ability to offer something to it that is wholesome, that is healthy, that's good, that's compassionate, that's caring. And as you do that, then that's also awakening this new operating system, this deeper one.

And so if you're home caring for people and cannot even meditate, Perhaps you can breathe. Breathe with what you're doing. When you're changing the diapers at 3 a.m. in the morning, breathe. Breathe and harmonize your activity of changing diapers with the breathing that you're doing and see if the breathing can help you tap into something deeper going on here. The breathing can give you a little pause as you're taking care of a parent who has dementia. Can you find some way to find some kind of stability, some kind of spirituality in what you're doing as you do it? You don't have to go off on retreat. You don't have to go to Asia. You can do it in your ordinary life. And And sooner or later, that's what I had to do. And one of the things that happened for me, because of my route through all this, was that I didn't really start learning how to bring it into my daily life until I had children. It was a whole different thing. I'd done all this monastic life, but the challenges of that life were so different that I had to kind of, now I have to do it here. But you don't have to wait. You know, if your life doesn't allow you to meditate, you can still practice. You can still find your way. But it requires you to have agency. It requires you to make a choice to act in a certain way, to call upon what's wholesome, to recognize what is good in you, and try the best you can to live with it. And you probably fail a lot. And, but, you know, failing is not bad. Failing is how we grow. It's

like, you know, a child learning to walk. The kid falls so many times. The parents don't go, oh my god, my kid's a failure. He doesn't know how to walk. This is the end. I'll give up on this kid. No, you say, great. You have to fail a lot of times to finally learn how to walk. You have to keep falling. Spiritual life is that way too. You start again, start again, start again. We have agency and the question is to use it. To use it to let this deeper operating system begin having a chance to operate in your life. And it doesn't require you to go off, run away into But what might happen is that as this inner operating system begins to become stronger for you, And it's beautiful moments will happen where you feel the onward nature of it. You feel that it has you, has your back. You feel that it wants to grow in you. It wants to support you. There's something here that is really here to serve you that is not the usual self that you identify yourself with. There's something marvelous within you that is not yourself. that's here to support you and be with you and help you kind of find your way onward and grow with this inner goodness, this dharmic place within that we all have, we all can do.

So agency, people who have no agency, It can be very, very hard. They feel like they have no capacity to do anything to grow or do anything for themselves or be safe or take care of their family. It's a really hard thing. Being able to have the freedom to do things and feel like you can make a difference is crucial to a healthy human life. And when we come into this practice that we talk about here at IMC, That agency is applied to this inner spiritual or inner operating system that we want to bring forth and use as a reference point and let that have a chance to grow and be the source of how we live our life. And we start. over again, over and over again, every time we fail. But we have to start. If you don't exercise your agency, it won't happen. So I'll end with a little saying I do that maybe irritates some people. So I say it this way. It's a little bit of theater goes into saying this. So I say, mindfulness does not work. unless you do it. So now it's your turn. If you have any questions, protests that you would like to offer, or testimonials, or anything you'd like to do, say, ask.

Gil, I loved your example about the child learning to walk. It's very humorous and a perfect example. Great, thank you. Is there a mic over in the back? I don't know, Martha's coming with. Thank you.

Gil, I noticed in your description of your retreat desire that you didn't use the word desire or wanting or *taṇhā* or thirst. Yet I could imagine somebody with probably hedonic addictions having that same sort of feeling, feeling tone that would be underneath that desire. Sure. Can you maybe talk about the difference between those two? I guess it's healthy desire and not healthy desire. I'm not sure. Yeah. Well, Yes, I really want to go on a retreat because I've noticed that the people who really get a lot of praise in spiritual circles are the ones who go

on retreats. There's something about retreats. And I'm going to go, not only am I going to go on a retreat, I'm going to build up a resume. of all the retreats I've done with all the great teachers, and if I have that resume, I'll be a really hot shot guy. And it'll be exciting to be praised and delighted, and everywhere I go, people will see me as if I'm walking on clouds, and they'll bow to me, and boy, that'll be a great life. So that is a lot of, That's a desire which can bring me a sense of delight in the imagination of it, but it's going to be a dead end. And it's going to feel like if I really pay attention, really mindful, I'll feel the stress of that. I'll feel the pressure. I feel the unsatisfactory nature of that desire. I feel how easy it is to be pulled around by the nose. And in a certain kind of way, the loss of agency I think that I'm acting on my free will, but it's not exactly free will when these addictive compulsive thoughts grab us by the nose and pull us along. So I think you can feel the difference. And for me, I think of it, there's really two different operating systems and you can feel that one has a sense of, if you really drop in, has a feeling of rightness. And the other, you can see, you can pay attention, it's mostly to do with the external world. It's a desire having to do with what the praise I'll get, as opposed to its satisfying in and of itself. So that was my effort, my attempt to offer you something. Do you feel like I answered your question? Great.

You talked about something coming up for you the first time you wanted to go to a week-long retreat and that that was fear. And then you ended up going on a retreat. A year later. Could you talk about how the fear went away? Oh. You know, I know it was fear, but I don't think I was so self-aware back in those days to know what I was afraid of. I just knew I was afraid. And I think the reason I was easier to go back, I think it was, no, it was more than, it was almost two years before I went back to do it again. And by that time I had moved to San Francisco and started, I lived near San Francisco Zen Center in an apartment, and I started going and sitting every day with the Zen Center. and in their meditation hall. And I started doing day-long retreats that they did. And so three quarters of a year of doing that, living close to that Zen center and in that environment and sitting every day with them, I think that prepared me. So I don't think I had, I think I didn't have fears. I might have had some fear, I don't remember. But I didn't have the fear that prevented me to go. I think because I'd become familiar with that whole process, I'd done enough meditation, it just felt like a continuation. Every day I sat, I think we sat two hours, two 40 minute periods every morning. And so I felt like it was just like a continuation rather than a big jump. And so for those of you who are interested in going on a retreat, some people do really well being with beginner's luck. They just jump right in without knowing anything. But I think for most people, it's good to kind of build up to it. And so here at IMC, we have what we call them half-day retreats. I told that to a monastic once, and he was like, looked at me like, what? our Wednesday mornings here. We have two

sittings and we call it a retreat. But we have these mornings to do practice here and then we have day logs on Saturday. So kind of to build up.

Hi Gil. So to your Part of your talk about having a calling or feeling this calling made me think about how sometimes you have more than one calling or things that really activate some energy and also made me think about the fear around callings. And I'm just thinking, I'm just wondering if you could speak about how practice can kind of help you navigate the complexity of life in that way. Yeah, maybe it can't. Something else will have to operate to help you find your way. I think a wise lie, there's so many callings, so many great things to do in life. And there's a kind of, in the kind of modern world, there's so many options, so many calls, so many things that we can do and think we should do in a way that's never happened in human history before. And so people want everything. So a wise life, especially a spiritual life or Dharmic life, does require making choices. And you have to figure out what the choices are. Occasionally you can do two things or three things and manage to balance them. But sometimes you have to choose. And sometimes it's very hard to choose. But I've been up against that in my own life a number of times. And sometimes I've spent at least a year gnawing and struggling over this question, what should I do? What path should I take here? And every time the gnawing, I'd go for walks, I would think, I would reflect. I spent a lot of time thinking and wondering. And it turned out that thinking was valuable, I believe. It was kind of like composting what was something inside so something can grow. But the answer never came from my thinking. For me, something inside suddenly knew. It was always a sudden thing. Now I knew what to do, what I had to do. So that was my way. Sometimes if you don't know what to do, you might just flip a coin. And sometimes flipping a coin, whatever the result is, you say, oh, oh no. And, you know, that reveals something much more clearly. And the other thing is I can offer is that I don't know what your, you know, what the options are for you. But sometimes doing one thing really well opens amazing doors. so that maybe what the other thing is can come and join it later. Or you find a way to do it later. It's just right now I'm going to do this really well and create a foundation and then something else can happen. So I feel at least that's happened to me because I don't know if I do it really well, but I give my life to this kind of practice here. Slowly over the decades all these doors started opening up. in society and in the Dharma and doors to do things. So things that I wanted to do when I was young, now I can do them in a whole different way. I was, for example, I was an environmental studies major in college. I wanted to work with ecology and environmental issues. And now as a Buddhist teacher, many years later, I started a Buddhist eco-chaplaincy program. And I taught nature Dharma teacher training to support people to be able to teach this kind of practice in the wilderness. And I feel like, oh, it came

back. By doing this well enough that I could train people to be teachers, I got to train people to be teachers in the wilderness. So anyway, so just do one thing well and see what comes out afterwards.

Okay. Well, thank you very much. And we do have the tea today. So it'd be nice if you just turn towards someone near you, especially if they're new, so they feel welcomed. And say hello, introduce yourself. And if you are new, you belong here now for today. So you can welcome the person who says hello to you too. So thank you.