

Make it better

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Good morning everyone and can you hear me all right? It's okay out there? So I want to start with an introductory story to this talk. So maybe teeny story, maybe you'll think of it insignificant, but it represents something, a really important turning point in my life. So at some point I spent about three years doing Zen training at a Zen monastery here in the United States. And it was quite nice, but you know, it's kind of, you fully enter into that world.

It's deep in the mountains. There's, you know, 14 miles on a very small, steep dirt road to go into the national forest lands in the middle of it, which is this little monastery. And so it's completely involved in that world for three years. And Zen training is done with a lot of ritual. And there's a lot of ways in which you engage your body. So, for example, if you want to step into the meditation hall, you always have to step in with a particular foot first.

And you can't just step in without foot and just kind of casually walk around. You have to have your hands in a particular way as you walk through the meditation hall. And there's a particular way of walking through the meditational. You can't just take the shortest route to your seat. You have to kind of take a certain route around the place. And when you get to your seat, you're going to plop yourself down and kind of pick your nose a little bit and get ready.

You would, you bow to your seat. And then you turn around and you bow away from your seat. And then there's a particular way in which you turn around and sit down on the seat. And then classically in Zen there's a particular posture you sit in. And most classically you sit in full lotus, upright. Most people don't sit in full lotus, but half lotus or quarter lotus or something.

But there's a very particular, it's very important that your back be straight. And so there's all these ways of being and being with other people. You walk through the monastery and you

see someone, you bow to them. And ideally you would stop and just stop and bow. And so I think I counted how many times I had to bow before 10 o'clock in the morning and I think I got up to 54 bows and all the things. And that was not including all the people I had to stop to on the path to bow to.

And there were some people, including me occasionally, who would see someone coming down there and we'd go the other route so we wouldn't have to bow. But the point being that a lot of the day was choreographed. And they were choreographed with these particular forms, kind of ritual forms you took. And they're quite powerful to live in. It requires a lot of mindfulness. And it requires a lot of presence.

And some of these things you do with your body carry with them certain kind of attitudes, certain kind of feelings that affect you. For one, it's always done somewhat with intentionality and a certain kind of fullness, you're really there to do each thing. And so your sense of participating with your life comes alive in that kind of world. Because, you know, you don't just sit back, well, you know, go to the Zen Dojo when I feel like it and, you know, stumble in and might really want to be here and, you know, you might have those thoughts, but your body has to like, really be there and participate. And putting your hands together like this, and all those bows we do there, something, even if you don't want to bow, there's something about that movement that will probably affect a lot of people. Maybe different people in different ways, but for me it developed a lot of gratitude, a sense of appreciation.

And through the day, have these bows, little, you're doing them every day, so many times through the day, and for weeks and months on end. Something begins to shift inside. The same thing is happening for most of you in everyday life. In all the little movements that you make in your body, in your voice, in your thing, and you're reinforcing something. So if you are going around kind of, you know, just kind of like uninterested in life, and you know, everything you do, you kind of do kind of like, oh, I'll get to it. Oh, oh, it's too hard.

Oh, who wants to do this? This is a drag. Why do we have to do this? All those little voices might have some value to them. But the sum total of that kind of attitude, it kind of dampens the energy. It kind of drains a person.

It kind of doesn't bring a vitality and an engagement in life. It's more like keep pulling back, pulling back. And there's a lot of attitudes that we do in our life that we express in all kinds of small ways. And some of those are not so great. I know some people who have an aversive nature. And there's something about saying little aversive statements, little resistant statements, that maybe one statement is okay, but to do them as many times as you bow in the monastery, they tend to create a habit, a momentum, a familiarity, a sense of this is what I

do.

So it becomes almost second nature. You don't even think about it anymore, but have this little, little, you know, pieces of aversion or pieces of something or something that goes on. So we're all in a Zen monastery. We just don't know it. In the sense that we're all doing something with our body, our voices, our eyes, that are expressing something or living something or carrying attitudes and beliefs and sense of relationships and all kinds of things are being carried with it all the time. But most of us don't see that most of what we carry, most of what we're doing, don't see the impact that has on us.

So when I left at the monastery after three years, where so much of the life was choreographed, and it was kind of chosen for me, all kinds of things, when to wake up, when to go to the meditation hall, and when to do this and that, and how to do these things, and even eating was, you know, most meals were carefully choreographed. Like, you couldn't just, like, pick up your spoon and start eating when you felt like it. You had to wait for a bell, and then you had to bow a certain way, you had to chant, you had to eat in a certain way, you had these very unusual kind of eating utensils, a little bit. And so the whole thing was kind of choreographed. And what was marvelous about eating in the monastery was we would eat in our meditation posture. And just taking that posture that we've been meditating in is very different than, you know, sitting at the table, you know, looking at the news on your phone while you're shoveling food into your mouth, which probably none of you do.

And, you know, you're really there and this is the activity of the moment. You don't bring your phone with you into the zendo. You know, you're there. We didn't have phones then. But I'm sure that they're not allowed in. And so three years of that.

When I left, as soon as I left and came back to San Francisco, I recognized something, and this was the revelation, that now it's up to me to decide how to do all these things. And I had so much more choice than I ever imagined I had. So I went to talk to the abbot one day, in a kind of formal discussion about practice, and I told him. Wow, coming back to San Francisco, you know, so many things are not choreographed anymore. I have a choice. And when I'm standing, I have a choice in how I stand.

When I sit in a chair, I never thought I had a choice before. I just sat the way I sat. I didn't think about it. But I have a hundred percent choice about how I sit in that chair. Do I slump? Do I... I've sat in couches so my shoulders were in the crack, you know, all the way down, you know, just like, you know, just really chilled.

And... So do I sit upright? Do I use the armrests? What do I do? And so I told him, I have

a choice in how I sit in the chair. And the abbot did something very unusual. He broke the rituals, broke the patterns of what you expect in a formal Zen setting. He's in robes, I'm in robes, we're sitting in meditation posture, having a serious conversation, maybe six o'clock, five o'clock in the morning, you know. I told him this and he lifted out his hand and shook my hand. It was like, congratulations, you understood something really important now.

I felt it was a real affirmation that I had a choice. I had a lot of choices to make. And I have much more choices to make in my life than I'd realized before I started the monastery. We have choices actually every moment of our life. We have choices. And if you don't see you have choices, you don't have choices.

But if you see you have choices, does that mean now you have a burden? Oh, Mark, more choices to make. It's exhausting. But we're making the choices anyway. We're making the choices subconsciously. And the choices we make make a difference.

And so what Buddhist practice has a lot to do is recognizing the places of choice and learning to make wise choices, beneficial choices. And that involves something as small as how you sit in a chair, something as small as how you stand, how you look, how you think, what you're thinking about. I was coming down here to talk about this, walking down here. So I was thinking about this. So it occurred to me, well, Gil, you have a choice now how you think about this. And as soon as I thought about that, oh, OK, let me look and see, how am I thinking about talking about the choices we have?

And I thought, oh, I'm probably a little bit contracted in the mind, a little bit tense, a little stressful, because after all, I'm talking in front of all these people. And I don't have to do that. I don't have to be worried about what I'm going to talk about. I want to talk about this thing, because I think it's important and helpful. What if I just shift how I think? And just think in an easy way, and think about it from how it's helpful for people.

And let me think in a way that's helpful for me. Let me think in a way that's beneficial for me. So I shifted how I was thinking, and it became really pleasant to think about giving this talk. I think I became a better person because of it. The difference was not that great. The shift was one degree or something.

But right there, there was a choice in how I think about something. So one of the purposes of meditation in Buddhism is not to make you calm and that's it. Not to give you some wonderful experience and that's it. Not to make you peaceful and that's it. But rather one of the important roles of meditation is to help you into a little or better state of mind, of heart, of being than you were before you meditated. And I say this intentionally, just a little, so you

don't have a high bar.

It means that if you're feeling kind of lousy that day, and you just feel a little bit less lousy, you've made it a little bit better. So the bar is low. But you make yourself better than you are if you didn't meditate. And that that way of feeling better now becomes a reference point for you to understand what kind of choices you want to make. How you want to now do what you want to do next. Because you can see, if I don't do anything, if I don't pay attention here, that's a choice.

If I don't pay attention here, just go back into all the things I have to do. Pretty quickly, I know all the demands and the difficulties I have. I'm gonna feel lousy again. I'm gonna feel really stressed out again. But you know, I have a choice here. Do I just go back, barrel ahead, and forget about my meditation?

Or do I use this feeling better as a reference point and see, can I stay close to this? Can I be careful not to abandon it? What would I choose to do next? So I stay closer to that, I maintain it a little bit. Well, maybe I get up and I don't rush. Maybe I get up and I don't pick up the most difficult thing to do.

Maybe I get up and don't immediately check for emails, because that just pulls me back into that world. Maybe there's something worthwhile to maintain how I'm staying right now. And if I maintain it, not only maintain it, let me not forget this state. Let me stay close to it. I'm feeling better after all. Let's stay close to it.

Now is that selfish? Is that indulgent? It can be. But if you pay, as you do this practice, you get more and more sensitive. That's the other purpose of mindfulness practice is not only to give you a better reference point in which to understand your life, but it's also to show you, give you a much more acute sensitivity, attunement with yourself that you see all the little choices you make. Oh, I don't have to do that.

Right now I'm kind of abandoning. Right now I'm giving myself over to boredom, giving myself over to discouragement, giving myself over to desire. I'm giving myself over to the anger. Is that what I want to do when I'm feeling kind of calm to begin with? Is there another way of going about this next? Is another way of sitting, is another way of standing, another way of, you know, whatever you're going to do. Is there a way of doing it that makes things better? Or at least keeps things as better as they've gotten to be?

So this last week, in my morning teaching that I did, some of you know, the theme was, don't make it worse. And one of the things I try to emphasize is that this little slogan, don't make it worse, whatever you're going to do, just simply don't make it worse, is very powerful. And

it encompasses the profundity of the Buddha's teaching, if you really understand how far and deep this topic of don't make it worse can go. But the Buddha had more to say than, don't make it worse. He said, make it better. And this is a central principle in the Buddha's teachings for how we live our lives, how we engage in our lives.

Based on these two things, don't make it worse, make it better. He didn't use that language, that's colloquial English. His ancient way of talking about it, if I told you, would put you to sleep. Or worse, just like, oh my God, I can't believe all these words. You know, sometimes he was so precise and careful in what he was saying that he had a lot of words to do it and it starts feeling kind of too technical or too something. But I can give you a little bit better colloquial sense of what he said.

He said, if you're making it worse, stop. If you're not making it worse, protect yourself from making it worse in the future. So that's a little bit more colloquial. And then he went on to say, if you're not making it better, start doing it. If you are making it better, and I think he loved making things better, because these first three he said, stop, protect yourself from doing it, and start. But this fourth one, if you are making it better, he said, stay close to it.

Maintain it. Don't forget it. Don't lose track of it. Increase it. Make it, and it's a wonderful word in Pāli, but make it abundant. What? Having better be abundant, a sense of abundance? I mean, that's like, you know, not being less grumpy. That's like something else. And then cultivate it and bring it to fulfillment. Bring it to its fullness. It means all these things.

So that's what he was most into. If you could do the first three, that prepares the ground so you can really get involved in the last one. Isn't that good? So Buddhism is not just about not suffering. It's about cultivating and developing and growing and staying close to something you've learned for yourself that's wonderful. Something you've learned that's worth staying close to and developing.

And that something is, and this is a very important part of this, is that when Buddha said, don't make it worse, make it better, absolutely it can apply to the world around you. But where we have the most choice, where we have the most opportunity to make a difference, is in ourselves. In the quality of our inner life. The quality of our heart, the quality of our mind. What's happening there and how we're responding to the world and reacting to the world. That's where we have the most opportunity.

We can't control the weather so well usually. But we can do the right thing. We can bring with an umbrella, for example. You can't necessarily prevent certain illnesses that happen, but you have some choice about how you relate to being sick. You can't necessarily choose,

you know, politics and what party is in office. But you can choose something about how you allow that to affect your inner life.

And what do you give yourself over to, or abandon yourself to, as if it has to be that way, or there's authority to these feelings, these attitudes. The place we can make the most difference, where we have the most choice, is in ourselves. And one way I love how it plays out in life is that sometimes we have to make big choices in life. And it's hard sometimes to make those decisions. And sometimes there's no real way of knowing which is going to be the right decision. Partly because we don't know what's coming.

We don't know what, you know, that decision will, you know, take us to a place in a time, a situation where things that are out of our control will happen and affect what happens. And so, sometimes every decision is the right decision. Two different decisions, both can be equally good. Who knows what the right one is? How some decisions become right and wrong is not by the decision, but how we live with the decision. The choices we make after we make that decision, how we live with the consequences of it.

And that's where we make best of it. So we start taking responsibility for the choices we make. And the one that, again, the Buddha focused on the most for practitioners was how these decisions affect our inner life. And that's why meditation can be so helpful. Because we're learning about the ins and outs of our inner life. We're learning about the operating principles of how we get caught, how we get reactive, the choices we make, the values we live by, the priorities we make, the biases we have.

If you start being mindful, carefully mindful, and you have a vantage point of calm, a vantage point, a reference point of some degree of peace or well-being, and you pay careful attention, what takes you away from that, boy, you'll learn a lot about yourself. And so one of the practices I recommend, when you finish meditating, appreciate whatever way you're a little better. And then try not to rush into your life right away. Pay attention and notice when you start losing that. When you're not feeling quite as calm or quite as settled or a little bit now you're getting started to rush and you're not paying so much careful attention anymore. So when you find yourself losing that, this is probably the most important moment in the wake of meditation.

The moments you're losing what you had that felt good for you. At that moment, stop. Maybe sit down, close your eyes. Just pause and take a good look at what just happened. What was I believing? What was my attitudes? What were the desires? Attitudes. What happened that I got caught now? So I'm rushing. What happened now? So now that I was fine, I felt confident, and now I feel discouraged. I was feeling peaceful and now I'm agitated. I was feeling happy

and now I'm sad, depressed, despairing. What happened there in that interface? And it might happen so quickly that you might not see the first day, the second day, but at some point you say, oh, look at that. I felt that life was going to leave me behind and I can't be left behind. All my friends will leave me behind if I don't answer all those emails. People will be angry with me. And there's, oh, that's what triggers me. That's what gets me caught. I have this belief, this little voice inside. Do I have to believe it? Is it true? Is there another thing that can be done? Is it worth the sacrifice? Is it worth giving up feeling better for feeling worse? And just that question, is it better to give up feeling better for feeling worse, is a powerful question to ask yourself. And if the lawyers of the mind come and explain to you all the reasons why you have to be worse, you have to put up with it because, you know, you better question that. You better get a new lawyer. And, you know, bring it to the court and really have a discussion.

What we learn over time, I hope, is that we learn to cultivate a healthy inner life and learn how to stay close to that and value it and see how many benefits come from it. And we learn to recognize when the inner life feels healthy and not. So then the Buddha, when he had this teaching about stop, prevent, making it worse, initiate making it better, and then keep making it better. What he actually said was not worse than better. He used a word in ancient language that can usually translate into English in two different ways. One is it translates as skillful. And skillful also can mean ethical. Is it avoiding causing harm? It's doing the opposite of causing harm, bringing benefit. So skillful, is it skillful? But it's also translated into English as wholesome. Is it wholesome or unwholesome? And that really takes you into yourself. Does it feel like a right, wholesome, healthy, beneficial, skillful, ethical thing to do? We have an inner reference point, an inner sensitivity to feel when something feeds us and nourishes us and makes us feel better and makes us feel freer and more alive in a good way. And we have a capacity to feel when we do the opposite. When it makes us feel unwholesome. It denourishes me. It undermines me. It drains me. It makes me smaller or contracted or tighter or makes me feel kind of, you know, kind of stressed by just what's going on in the inner life.

So, we don't always know how to make the world around us better. We don't always know when we're making it worse, maybe unconsciously or by accident, unintentionally. But we can track it for ourselves. And it's invaluable to do that. And to start doing that in a way, you know, so that you start slowly, but start doing it to become second nature. So that, and this is what's happened to me over these years of practice, so much of this is just second nature. It's like riding a bicycle. Your whole body and mind makes a lot of teeny decisions on the whole bike ride. Leaning this way, that way, going faster, slower, shifting the weight of your body,

where to look. But it's second nature to do it after a while.

When you first start it's stressful. But after a while it's actually relaxing to do it. To be that fully engaged and participate in your life with something you have mastery over. It's possible to develop mastery over all these decisions you do throughout the day. How you stand, how you sit, how you look at somebody, how you're with someone. I've learned at some point in that Zen practice, I learned that how I was with people was not there, present, attentive, available, receptive.

I was turning away, feeling embarrassed, feeling shy, feeling afraid, feeling like, you know, like I didn't know what I was supposed to do and I had to be really small. There's all these ways in which I was present for other people that I didn't know. But the Zen training, partly because in Zen you're sitting every day of many hours in an upright, open-chested, firm meditation posture. And so after a while, with that reference point, I could see when I collapsed. I could see when I turned my body away. I could see all these little cues that represented not a good way to beat with other people.

And I learned, what if I just dare? Relaxed, full, open, it's really nice. I saw someone this weekend, this last few days, who was kind of facilitating a very difficult conversation with a group of people. And she had those qualities in her. It was remarkable. Every difficult thing that was thrown at her. She was just there, and thank you, and just like, okay, and she didn't cringe, she didn't pull down, she didn't get defensive, she didn't get like trying to apologize in some kind of inappropriate way, or, you know, she's just, oh, okay, okay, well, now we'll take this into account. Okay. And it felt so friendly and so caring. This is someone who had practiced for years that she had that ability. And it felt to me like it was second nature.

So, in summary, there's something really powerful, very profound in this simple statement, make it better. And to use that as a guideline as you go through, don't forget that as you go through your life. If that's too much for you, if that's too saccharine and too idealistic and too like, you know, I don't deserve it, well then the next best thing is don't make it worse. At least don't make it worse. But you can make it better. And one of the purposes of meditation is to give you the information, give you a reference point for better, so you know how to do this in your daily life.

You have a guide, you have a support, you have a reference point for it. And don't look for grand spirituality. Don't look for the big bang experiences of enlightenment. Don't look for, you know, great states of peace. Build towards that. With little, one drop at a time, with one little moment at a time, in these little details of how you live your life, of how you stand, how you sit, how you walk, how you speak, how you listen, how you engage with your computer,

with your device.

So many people lose themselves in those. And you've probably seen a lot of people out in the world that are completely lost and absorbed in a way that doesn't seem good. Of course, you don't do that, right? Pay attention. Pay attention to how you make things worse. At least try to stop that.

Try to make it better. And you do it, you don't just do it for yourself, you do it for the world. Because the more that you learn to do this for yourself, the more you're available to the world in a good way. When you cultivate and develop the wholesome in yourself, that wholesome spills out as wholesome interactions, wholesome ways of being in the world with other people. If we do what's unwholesome for us, denourishes us, it's hard to then come back to the world in ways that benefit the world as well. So with all this, I hope now you appreciate this little slogan, make it better.

And you see the value of that. So maybe, so we're, you know, it's well before the usual official ending time here at 1045 is when we end. And we have tea today. So I think it would be nice of those of you who would be happy enough to do this, that you would introduce yourself to a couple of people next to you. And maybe have a little conversation about did any of this talk have any meaning for you? Was there any reference point in your life for how this could be useful?

And you might consider, as you have that conversation, that very principle. So it's very easy for some of us, including myself, to respond to things with, that's not going to work. That's not right. And then it's true, if you believe that. But there might be one circumstance in your life where what I taught about today will be beneficial for you. If you only look at how that didn't work, I don't believe in what he had to say. Well, that's okay. I don't want to take that away from you. But even if it was one circumstance in once in a hundred years of your life, this teaching is useful, then you'll benefit from this teaching. So maybe you can try to benefit from the conversation by talking about how it might be useful for you. But you don't have to if you don't want to.

So anyway, it's mostly just say hello. And we have a tea, so it's nice for people who are new to be met with someone and welcomed and included here and meet someone. And that way, maybe you want to stay for the tea and continue your conversations. So we'll have probably about five minutes just to chat and talk. And look around so that no one's left kind of sitting alone. So just look around and invite them into your group or whatever. And I'll ring a bell at some point so we have an official ending. And then we can go have tea. Together. Thank you.