

## Reference Points for Practice

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So what I'd like to talk about today is a little bit of an expansion of what I talked about Wednesday morning here, the half day sitting we have. And the simple way is that, the simplest kind of introduction is that it has to do with a, as we practice, we develop a growing set of reference points that guide us in our practice. And so we're no longer guided by instructions from other people, from the texts, but rather from ourselves, because we have developed these reference points of something really good, really healthy and wholesome, that is available to us, we know for ourselves. And so we know how to go forward. We know how to find our way and what is useful and healthy to do.

And it's phenomenal to have that shift from taking Buddhism as an external reference point for your life versus having internalized something that you know for yourself as a reference. So that is the basic kind of premise for today's talk. And in the course of it, maybe also it'll give you a sense of why in mindfulness meditation we put tremendous importance on mindfulness of the present moment. Sometimes a present moment is, I feel, gets over idealized in our scene. And like it's all good just to be in the present moment. But the purpose of being in the present moment has a particular purpose, particular reason.

If you understand that, it's a lot easier to do this practice. And I remember many years ago there was a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon, kind of cartoon, that had something like Calvin and Hobbes were climbing a tree. It looked like a glorious day like today. And they were climbing a tree and Calvin says, oh, something, I'll paraphrase it, something like, oh, it's so great just to be in the present moment enjoying life this way. Sounds like perfect, you know, mindfulness. And Hobbes says to Calvin, Yes, but you're supposed to be at school right now.

And that was kind of a little bit my problem taking my kids to school when they were in preschool and kindergarten is I was in the present moment taking them to school. But as

we walked out of our front door to get to the car, they were really in the present moment with the flowers outside our house, the little sticks that were there. And like, you know, they were really present. And there was a conflict between two present moments. So the present moment. So somehow I want to also do as an introduction to this idea of the references for practice.

That a really big turning point for me in my involvement with Buddhism was the day I decided to devote my life to Buddhist practice in the form, and that took the form back then, being a Zen student, to deciding I wanted to be ordained as a Zen monastic. And being a monastic, for me, was not becoming a teacher, but rather dedicating my whole life to Buddhist practice. But the reason that I had for it was that for this was that I wanted to be able to address the suffering of this world. And I wanted to be able to address it at its root. And back then when I was younger, the root I felt was the attachment we have to self. And I knew in my limited experience of life, I knew of nothing else that touched that root than Buddhist practice.

And I had already been wanting to address some of the suffering of the world. I went to, you know, very different than what I'm doing now. My undergraduate degree is in agronomy. So agriculture, I was going to be a farmer. And but in the course of that education, I became familiar with the growing potential catastrophe around the world of soil erosion. And it seemed like very few people knew about it.

Back then, nuclear proliferation was the big thing that people were focusing on, trying to stop. But my thing was I was so aware. Soil erosion was a huge issue. And so at some point I decided I actually applied to go to graduate school to study soil science so that I could go around the world and address the issues of soil erosion. And so that was kind of the contrast, you know, between deciding to become Buddhist and then deciding not to be a soil scientist and soil conservationist. And the rationale that I gave myself for that was that no matter how successful I was at conserving soil, protecting the world from soil erosion, which is a necessary thing to do, I don't want to diminish the importance of it, It would never really touch the heart, the depth of people's suffering, the existential suffering of people.

And I would feel like I would always have a dissatisfaction. I would always feel like it's not quite enough. And I didn't know if I'd be effective in being a Buddhist monastic and helping the suffering of the world. But at least I felt like I'd had the satisfaction that I was trying to address it at its roots. And that seemed like a big, you know, big task. And I didn't quite know what the roots were. I had an intuition. This was more like an intuition that was operating based on a number of years of having practiced. And I had some sense it had to do with attachment. And as I said, attachment to self.

And those kind of, to say that, maybe it's kind of idealistic, it's kind of like, maybe it recognizes being some of the grand ideas of what Buddhism is about. And maybe that's good. Or maybe not. But now we get to this topic of the reference. And the references for practice maybe aren't so grand. Maybe are not so amazingly idealistic. Maybe they're very ordinary in some ways. And so they're not idealistic. It doesn't look like, wow, you know, this is the end of suffering once and for all and end of attachment to self. Wow, that would be fantastic. Enlightenment. Thank you.

And, and, and so you know, maybe I'll get criticized either way. If I do the idealistic thing, then the people who wouldn't be practical say, well, that's, you know, that does nothing to do with my life. But the people who, you know, if I really ordinary with it and simple, then the people who say, well, that Buddhism is much more than that. So it's hard to be a Buddhist teacher. So, but the reference points. So this has been on my mind a little bit because in the last few weeks I had an occasion where, I think on the same day, I had a desire for a particular Buddha statue that I had seen a number of them about and And, you know, I kind of wanted to have one, and not for myself, but I wanted to have one, to get one, and maybe give it to someplace.

When I came back to the United States, I was in Japan. And oddly enough, in the small little towns I was in, the only place it was liable to find this particular statue was at a I think they were called *boseki* in Japanese, a gravestone store. So I had to try to go to the various people and try to explain to them gravestores. So why would a Westerner in Japan want to go to a gravestone store? And I had a hard time getting them to understand because my Japanese was pretty poor. but I finally found one and went there. So it was a bit of a project, right? To look for where I can buy this kind of thing. And then later in the day, there was an occasion to consider, it evoked in me a feeling of generosity, of giving something to someone. And then those two states of mind contrasted each other.

And I saw that in some ways, when my mind had the desire for this Buddha statue, my mind got narrower, got smaller, got a little bit more contracted, you know, focusing on getting this thing. But when the generosity was there, my mind became more open, more relaxed, more at ease. And that difference is a reference point. Which of those mind states is more useful? Which of the mind states would I like to live in? Which of the mind states do I want to allow for?

What I do with my mind is a really important thing. What I do with my heart is a really important thing. And which of those do I want to predominate and become the predominant characteristic of my mind? And I know there are times in my life where the predominant char-

acteristic of my mind has been attachment, clinging, caught up in greed or desires for something. There are times predominant characteristic has been resentment or anger, hostility, and that's what's caught up. Sometimes it's been fear or anxiety for things that probably I didn't need to be afraid of.

but I was still kind of, you know, the contraction of the mind, the narrowing of the mind, the tightening of the mind, the stress on the mind that certain states have. And there was a time in my life where I didn't know I was having this. I didn't know there was any, you know, it was just so ordinary to have a stressful mind, a contracted mind, a caught up mind, churning away with its concerns. I just thought, well, that's, this is, I mean, I didn't even think about it. I just, this was human life. As I started to practice more and more, an alternative became clearer and clearer.

And the alternative was a mind which had no contraction, a heart that was not caught up in something. And and had a level of peace in it, or calm, or openness, or joy, or delight. All these things are kind of characteristics of an alternative kind of mind. And they don't all happen at once, but the different times you feel different ones. And they set up a contrast between something that in Buddhism is considered unhelpful to have, and something which is helpful. Something which is wholesome versus something that's unwholesome.

And that becomes a personal reference point. That becomes the, sometimes it feels somatic. So it's really personal and direct and immediate. Sometimes it feels more mental. Sometimes it feels more something of a part of our emotional life. We really feel there's an alternative.

And so even coming down here today, I walked down here and I was going to talk and think about this talk a little bit and walk down. And as I started thinking about it, I could see that my mind was doing that stressful thing. It was starting to get narrow and focused on it and concerned about it. And maybe even like, what are people going to think? And how am I going to say it right so that no one attacks me? You know, something like that. It was just a little bit like it was happening. And I knew better. I know an alternative. The alternative is close at hand.

So for me, there's a reference point that is kind of ever-present that is guiding me. And so as my thinking mind was going down that track, I knew immediately, this is not interesting. I don't want to live my life that way. This is not the world I want to live in that is caught up in thoughts and concerns this way and fears or preoccupations. And so, you know, in this context it was relatively easy just to let it go. And so it wasn't that I stopped thinking about the talk, or what to talk about here.

But rather, now my thinking, the quality of my thinking had changed. And now it was like having a friend in my mind. It was a friendly mind. It was this friendly, light, kind, kind of nice way of thinking about what was going on. that, you know, it was, you know, it was just nice to have that friend there. Whereas before that mind was me, I guess, both are me, but I wouldn't have characterized it as my friend.

Sometimes, you know, it's the taskmaster. Sometimes, you know, all kinds of, you know, other characteristics. So we have these reference points. And in these that I've described today for myself, I think they were more mental. In mental, they were also somatic. Because the ways in which the mind contracts and gets tight and caught up, I feel a little bit of tension around my forehead, around my eyes, kind of behind my forehead and the area of the front of the brain.

I don't know exactly what's going on there, but that's what it feels like. And I think of it as a thinking muscle that I can relax. Other times it's clearly embodied. Sometimes a reference point has been my belly. And sometimes I have a soft belly and then it's all tight in a knot. It used to be before I started practicing it was always tight in a knot. And then it took years for that knotted stomach to relax and relax and relax.

Luckily I was not in a hurry because if I had been and thought I was a terrible person for having a tense stomach, I would have made more tents. But it took years of my practice to slowly relax that belly. And that made a world of difference. And now I have this reference point that's kind of there. Oh, there it is. Maybe I should take a look. My belly tensed up. What just happened?

As opposed to the belly tensed up and this means there's something dangerous and I need to fight or flight. I've learned not to let these changes in the body and mind and heart drive the ship. I've learned to recognize them and say, is this what I want to do? What's really going on here? Let's take a deeper look. What's happening here?

And usually, the tense stomach is not useful. There are some times I have what could be considered a tense stomach when I'm having fun and playing. And that seems okay. Then I'll put up with it. Then it's a fine thing to have. But there are times when it's really an indication that something is off.

And so I have that reference point. I have had that reference point with my hands. My hands will tighten up in certain circumstances or I start kind of playing too much with my fingers, you know, because I'm afraid or something. And that's a reference point. The shoulders are a reference point. I've had a reference point in my chest where I feel like my heart is closed.

There was a time in my life, I think I was about 15, where someone teased me about something or belittled me about something I just said, and I immediately, there was a decision, it wasn't even me, it was like something deeper, somatic, I could feel something close in my heart, and I said, I'm never going to show that to anyone again. And it took years for that to open up and relax and be willing to share in a more vulnerable place of who I was. And so we have these things that we do that don't serve us very well. And as we practice, they begin to relax, begin to open, begin to soften, and things quiet down. And the important thing that as this happens is to take that seriously. not as something to get attached to, but rather something that can help you read yourself, become a self-whisperer.

I love this phrase, you know, they just used to be, first it started with horse whispers, but now it's like, now it's everything, and this is the first time I've ever heard someone say self-whisperer. But I think it's something profound, this idea of, you know, to have that kind of sensitivity to yourself, that you really know yourself deeply and well, that a lot of people don't actually know themselves. They might know very well what they're thinking about, what they believe, and what they fight for, but they haven't really tuned into the deeper operating systems, the deeper movements that's going on. And often people are living a one-dimensional life in a sense. And as we practice, the more dimensions of who we are reveal itself. And what I'm pointing to today is that what reveals itself is that we have this place where the mind can be relaxed and at ease.

The heart can be at ease. The body can be at ease in some way or other. Versus it can get stressed. The mind, the body feels stressed and sometimes the stress is kind of kind of comes from outside, but sometimes it's clearly we're contributing it to it. And so we're kind of working with this what's stressful and not stressful. In fact, there's a one of the main translators of the Buddha's teachings to English is a monk in San Diego named Thanissara Bhikkhu, who comes here sometimes and teaches And the common English translation of the Buddhist word *dukkha* is suffering.

And suffering is such a big thing. You know, it's like, what do we mean even? But this monk, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, he translates *dukkha* as stress. And immediately I think it gives a kind of almost somatic reference point, a clear reference point. And he's actually said that, I think he's the one who said it, that getting married is one of the most stressful things people do. Now you wouldn't say, you know, getting married is the biggest suffering people have. I mean, especially at the wedding. That doesn't, that's not quite right. But to appreciate that it's stressful, that's understandable. And so the word stress really makes it much more applicable, these teachings and this practice, that if we always, like I do, maybe too much, empha-

size suffering, suffering, suffering, and the end of it. Stress and the end of it.

So this idea of stress and the absence of it becomes a powerful reference point. And so this is not an idealistic ideology. It's not necessarily Buddhist, you know, you have to believe Buddhist teachings. This becomes a time when we learn to believe ourselves. We believe and see for ourselves what works and doesn't work. And even if the Buddha came here today and he walked in and he said, Hey, you should stop listening to this guy. You know, everything I said was wrong. You know, you just go find something else to do because I completely had it wrong. And you just forget all this Buddhist stuff. And you would say, well, that's maybe nice for you. But I know for myself, I've discovered, I have this personal reference point. I know the difference between getting stressed and not stressed.

if you want to use the big word, getting involved in suffering and not getting entangled with it. Getting attached and not being attached. That is so clear and so obvious that that's going to guide my life because I know one is better than the other. One is healthier than the other. One provides much more wisdom. One provides much more kindness and support.

One represents the world I want to live in. The other represents a world I don't want to live in. And just imagine, at least some of you who are not saints, and just imagine that situation at a time when you were at your worst, you know, caught up in anger and resentments and attachments and greed or whatever it might have been, your thing. Just imagine multiplying that by the billions of people we have on this planet. That's the illness that's spread across the land and everyone has it. That's not the world we want to live in.

Is there an alternative? Can we live in a world of peace? Can we live in a world where everyone comes from that possibility in the mind, where the mind is free? Where the mind is free of its clinging, attachment, hates, resentful resentments. And I think that as we live our social life, having these two references are invaluable. Because as we get more and more sensitive, and that's part of the purpose of mindfulness is to be in the present moment, and then be sensitive to the distinction between that stress and not stress, being open or closed in unhealthy ways.

And at some point we can feel that towards people, some people for whatever reason, we feel some fear, some judgments, or some little bit of hostility, or some like negative orientation. But as we see the mind go that way, we feel the impact it has on us. And we say, this is not good for me. I'm diminishing myself. to get involved in that kind of ideation and thoughts and judgments and ideas. And because we have this reference point and alternative, then we're much less likely to get caught in our bias and our prejudice and our judgments and hostilities of people.

And I've had an occasion recently where someone said something critical of me, and I could feel kind of the mind begin to go in the direction of being defensive or critical back or how could you say that. It was so brief because of this reference point that I live with all the time. In these circumstances, immediately I just dropped it and turned to the person and said, can you tell me more? What do you mean? And then I just said, okay. And that was enough. In that circumstance.

And how different would it have been if I responded to the old way of defensive and criticalness and how could you and let me tell you. And when you did it. And it wasn't a moralistic thing. It wasn't like the ethical thing is to be kind. The ethical thing is to avoid being judgmental. It's deeper. It goes down to the roots. It was, is it stressful for me or not stressful? Is there a better way to engage the world and people? And this is what I kind of mean by the roots. Really get down to the roots of where things are, where we can feel and sense and know for ourselves.

And so it can be very ordinary in ordinary circumstances, this reference point. It doesn't seem grand and religious and ultimately spiritual. But to live this way and fill your life with this way is, from a Buddhist point of view, a spiritual life. And it changes the world we live in. Changes ourselves. And it has a huge impact on ourselves over time. And eventually maybe does lead to enlightenment. Wouldn't that be nice? The small little steps that lead all the way. So those are my thoughts today.

And we have 15 minutes before the potluck. What I'd like to suggest is that, partly so that those of you who want to stay or not stay, you can just kind of be friendly with each other a little bit. And so to go into groups of three or so, or four, and have a little conversation about what it touched you in some way. But be very careful when you have these conversations that you don't tell someone everything that you could tell them. But rather, just make one point. Just make one point. Restrain yourself. Make one point so other people can make one point. And so it feels more like everyone's participating. Just go around and around that way.

And then we'll do that for maybe, not so long, maybe for about seven minutes, half the time we have until the patlak. And then we'll come back here in the whole group. And I'll be available for, you know, if you want to ask some questions about this talk or this topic, or something else, then I'm available for a few minutes. And then when the patlak has been set up and ready, we can all go and eat. So, is that okay? So, for those of you who want to stay, if you don't want to be part, if you want to stay for the Q&A or for longer, you're welcome to stay in your seat or just go be outside for seven minutes. You don't have to be caught in this



idea of talking to people. But if you'd like to do it, then, you know, maybe groups of three or four, but just look around and make sure no one's still left alone, because sometimes people somehow turn to the one side or the other, but the person in the middle is, Unintentionally, but just look around, make sure everyone's included. Thank you.