

Being Your Own Teacher and Disappearing

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So I came back to sit down here, and the biggest feeling was just appreciation and gratitude that you're here. Some of you have been here all day, some of you have come in the course of the day, and I'm kind of... feel very gratified or grateful that we could have this time together this way and to be able to join you here at the end. So to give a talk and the funny thing about giving Dharma talks is they're not supposed to be about themselves. And if anything, I think a Dharma talk is supposed to be pointing to something in you, something that's possible for you. At the minimum, it points you to your practice, encourages in your practice, inspires it, guides it. Ideally, a Dharma talk is a, can function as kind of a mirror in which you see yourself better, rather than receiving information from abroad, and this is how things are, it's more like supporting, helping you to see how things actually are for you.

And that the goal of a Dharma talk and maybe a Dharma teacher is to help you become your own teacher, to help you be able to read your own heart, your own mind, your own experience, so you can find your own way in this world. I once asked, when I was doing Zen practice, I asked a Japanese Zen teacher. How do you know when someone's ready for to be a teacher? Are you ready for what they call a Dharma transmission? And I was surprised by his answer. I wasn't expecting it. He said, when a person can stand on their own two feet.

That was convenient. And I understood that to mean when they knew how to find the practice for themselves. They knew how to be present in this world and could have a simple way of being free, simple way of being here, and they could rely on themselves. They don't have to pull out the manuals of Buddhism. What do I do next? They didn't have to get the encyclopedias of Buddhism to find out what is true. What's the Buddhist truth that I'm supposed to believe? But rather, there's kind of turning here in your experience.

So when I was first introduced, not first, but early in my time practicing in Thailand... I practiced with a somewhat famous Thai teacher named Ajahn Buddhādāsa, that is monastery.

And I did a 10-day retreat there. And one of the important things that happened, there were two important things that happened for me in that retreat. One was going to lunch. We had no meals in the evening, so lunch was pretty important. And I was relatively young with a lot of metabolism. So by time lunch came around, I was really hungry, famished, feeling weak.

And we had to walk from the meditation hall down this dirt road. And we had to walk from the meditation hall down this dirt road to another part of the forest where the kitchen, I think it was an outdoor kitchen, where they were making food for us to serve us. And I noticed something about myself that when I was walking down that dirt road to lunch, the center of gravity, my identity, who I was, somehow something so central to who I felt like I was, was about two feet ahead of me. Something inside of me was leaning forward eagerly for that lunch. And I thought, this is strange. And so then I would come back to here, to just be centered in myself, not be ahead of myself, in the future, to the lunch out there, to the place out there.

And I'd come back, and that was nice to be here. And then very quickly I found myself again, because of my hunger, like ahead of myself. Come back, Gill. Where are you going? Stay here, in yourself. And that was fascinating. It was the first time I realized I could have an outer-the-body experience in a certain kind of ordinary way where I wasn't really present for myself because I was so anticipating something, wanting something.

And then I've had the experience of not happy with what's happening, and sometimes when I'm not happy with something that's happening, I have the ostrich approach to life. Ostriches are supposed to put their head in the sand to avoid the danger. So you don't see it, I guess, I don't know what. But sometimes, like, there's some challenge, and I'll kind of hunker down, like putting my head in the sand. And so then, rather than going ahead of myself, I disappear in myself, kind of. And that's interesting, where did I go? And that doesn't work either. It's shutting down, turning off.

And so I've seen myself do that, and I've brought myself out. Sometimes it hasn't lasted for long back. I fell back in. Gill, stay present, be here, come here. And what eventually was to, I've had to play this dynamic. And so part of my being my own teacher is to know these things about myself and to attract them. And to see that there's a better alternative. It's actually better to be here, present, than ahead of myself. It's actually better to be here present in a full way here than it is to sink and get lost in myself.

And so what's, the wonderful thing that happens, is that to really come up to here, be present now for this, here disappears. Can you believe that? Where does it go? It doesn't go anywhere. Where's here going to go? It doesn't really go. But something about the here disappears, the

concept of here, the idea of here. And so this midway between sinking in and being ahead of myself, it's this magic place where something disappears.

I have been times where... I get myself really activated and I'm up in my head. It's fascinating, too. I still find it doesn't happen so much anymore, but occasionally, and it's just fascinating that I can be sitting in meditation, minding my own business, just feeling calm and settled, and just being here. And if anything, what feels alive or alive is something in my torso. I feel present, grounded in my body. It's very nice. Thank you. And then I have a thought about some wrong some person did to me long ago. Just that somehow comes through. Maybe the sound of a car, a particular kind of car goes by outside here. And that car reminds me about someone who wronged me with their car. They ran into me. And I said, well, long ago I had someone who rammed into me in spite of me or in anger to make a point. Imagine that? Yeah. Wow, that's interesting. So I was a little bit scared, so I got out of there. This is not a good scene. And so anyway, so I remember these kinds of things. It's because the car goes by. I remember the thing.

And... Just like I have a... The volcano was released inside. And all this energy, and I'm no longer in my torso. Now I'm in my head. You know, wow. Boy, I can power California power grid with all this activation that goes on. And I'm over-activated in my head, spinning around. And then maybe it takes a while to settle down, to relax, to settle in. And, you know, so I've learned to recognize... where my energy is in my system, what's active? Where is the aliveness in me? And is the aliveness in me in a place that feels healthy and good, that feels satisfying and nourishing? And I can feel sometimes that it courses up like a volcano and it's, you know, it doesn't feel so good. I feel disconnected from myself, in a fuller way. I feel like now I'm agitated, I'm caught, I'm stuck, I'm kind of preoccupied. I'm...

And then there have been times where I've been deactivated. And rather than being somehow energized by something, it's like a volcano, I've become like a soggy marsh or something where everything is, like, difficult. And, oh, you know, really? I have to work on my taxes again. I just worked on them 12 months ago. And like go through that again, and where I have all those papers, and what do I need, and I don't have the right things, and how do I find it, and, you know, oh no. And sometimes it's not my favorite thing to do. And so I get kind of dispirited, and like, oh, no, I have other things I want to do that are fun and great, and I have to do this. Oh, and some life starts draining for me. Like kind of deactivate it.

So what's the reasonable thing to do? Go along with it. Be the person who is discouraged, upset. Be that person who just like is overwhelmed. Go along with a sinking feeling. But I've learned to read these things. I've run to know myself to track. Now I'm over-energized, now

I'm activated, now I'm deactivated, now I'm, there's this deep sense of sloth and that's there. And I've learned not to believe it, not to accept it, not to go along with it. I've learned not to be aversive to it, not to judge myself or be upset with it, but I've learned to bring it under the scope of practice.

So, okay, now that I'm this way, let me practice with this. Let me meet this. Now that I'm deactivated and this, you know, kind of a soggy swamp, let's bring practice to that. And there's a spark that begins happening. It's kind of like a little spark of practice, of awakefulness, that is brought to both of those. And it has a magic thing where the practice of awareness... It helps things come into balance, helps things come back to the middle way. If I'm really aware of being overactivated, it's almost like it gives it space for it to settle and relax or dissipate. If I bring careful attention to being kind of slothful and underactivated because of doing something I really don't want to do and resisting it, that somehow releases some kind of energy. And something comes alive again.

And it's almost like the same activity of attention has a different effect depending on what we're doing. And this is true with something like the hindrances. Sometimes when we're caught in the grip of desires or caught in the grip of aversions, it's kind of like certain kind of attention gets shut off, turned off. You might know you have these things happening. But we get pulled into the gravitational force field of these strong emotions of desire and ill-will. And it's kind of like a certain light goes off. And I liken it to being in a greenhouse. It's moist and humid, but it's dark because they've covered all the glass. And wonderful things grow in that moist, dark environment. Mold and slime and, you know, not the things that you want in the greenhouse.

But if you remove the covering from the greenhouse and the sunlight comes in, it kind of dries out the slime and the mold and stuff that are kind of yucky, and it allows the plants you want to grow to begin growing. So the same thing with the mind or the heart. That when we get caught in certain things and the spark of clear awareness is not there, it allows other things to grow that grow in the dark, kind of. And so ill will and strong desires and strong kind of maladaptive beliefs and stories can begin proliferating, and they grow. But then you turn on the light of awareness and you really see what's happening and the hindrances begin drying out, and marvelously something else can begin to grow. We have wonderful capacities within that thrive in the light of awareness. The desire to live an honest life arises in the field of clear awareness, like now I'm really paying attention. Of course, that's what the system wants, is to be honest. The desire to live a life of integrity comes from being really connected and having a light turned on, really aware and present here. What's happening here?

The desire to be generous. The call to have compassion for your neighbors and people and suffering in the world. This is what thrives in the light of awareness. Some things thrive and some things fall away. So as we become our own teacher, we began feeling and seeing these things. And the marvelous thing about seeing being over-energized or under-energized, as we bring awareness to that, and it comes into balance, it comes a point where the sense of being energized falls away. There's no energy. Not because there's no energy, but because it's no longer can be recognized as being too much, or being too little. And it's no longer kind of... We're just present. We're just alive, aware, present.

We can be aware of the hindrance is operating. We can bring mindfulness to it. We can be aware of the goodness that arises in the field of awareness. And then at some point, something disappears there. And one of the things that can disappear... is you. Isn't that good news? One of the things that disappears is being self-conscious about it all. One of the things that disappears is creating and forming a center. I am here. This is me. This is happening to me. This is mine. This is my problem, the hindrances. This is my goodness. That compassion and generosity are flowing. Because we start seeing that when we start having this me, myself, and mine, start locking on to identity and self, that that's actually an extra thing. And then we try to get rid of it if you're a good Buddhist. I'm not supposed to be that way. That doesn't work either.

What works is to be your own teacher, meaning read yourself, bring awareness to what's happening, know what's happening. Right. No, there's a lot of selfing happening now. This is what it's like. Feel it, sense it, be with it. This is aversion to selfing. I'm not supposed to be this way. This is a shudding. This is judgments. And then with the field of awareness, then some of this begins to get softer, quieter. We don't believe it as much. We're not feeding it as much. And this whole complex world of self, me, myself and mine, becomes quieter and quieter.

Some people are trying to avoid having a self. Some people don't want to have an identity, trying to not be seen by others. But that also doesn't work. There's a certain kind of dysfunctionality that exists among some Buddhists of having that being a self... who has no self. It's like, look at me. There's no self here. I hope people are recognizing that how good I am at not having a self. How self, you know, how self, I'm really selfless, selfless. It's probably selfish too then. And so there's kind of like a kind of like, the pendulum has swung from selfing to trying to be not self. We shine the light of awareness on that. There's no shame. There's not a crime to do this, but we see it. And to be your own teacher is to see it with care, with love, with compassion, with wisdom. Turn the light of awareness on that. And if we do that, then

the energy that goes into selfing or anti-selfing begins to dissipate, quiet down. We're not feeding it anymore. And at some point, the whole game of self can just disappear or recede into the background and no longer be operating in any way. It's disappeared.

So I don't know if you've noticed that in the course of this talk so far, I've now a few times mentioned about things disappearing. I mentioned that here disappears. Self disappears. Energy disappears. Is this bad news? Can you imagine... that it could do you any good to not have a here? If there's no here, there's no there. Well, that's even more crazy. Like, how am I going to be safe if I don't recognize it there? What is the Gill talking about? No here and there? No energy? Well, not exactly. There's no energy, and there's no lack of energy. In this middle state. Have you ever been awake? And you're neither tired nor agitated or tired, neither tired nor over-activated. You're just awake, and the whole idea of being awake disappears because there's nothing there that's noticeable. It's not a problem, and it's not overdone. Being awake disappears because it's not an issue.

How many things can drop away for you? How many things can disappear? How many things can disappear? Can you disappear and be so much better for it? Can you disappear and everything is so much better? Is that conceivable? Maybe it's conceived, not only inconceivable, it can seem undesirable, because of course you're supposed to take care of yourself, you're supposed to... do good things for yourself and you're supposed to heal yourself and have good relationships. And so much of our life is based on me, myself, and mine. Of course that's true. I'm not taking that away from you. But from time to time, from time to time, things disappear. When everything comes into balance, everything comes into equipoise, equilibrium, something disappears. When in deep meditation practice, the seven factors of awakening come into a perfect balance. Everything disappears. And in that whatever these disappearings are, that no longer there, there we find freedom, there we find clarity, there we find emptiness, there we find joy, there we find a sense of deep, sense of meaning, meaningfulness. There we find... a conduit for love and compassion. So things disappear, you disappear, and it turns out you're better because of it.

So, of course, you don't have to believe me. Remember what I said at the beginning, a Dharma talk is supposed to be a mirror to you, for you to look at yourself in a deeper way. And I have a lot of confidence that if you bring a lot of attention, mindfulness, concentrated mindfulness to hear, to see and understand and feel what's going on here, you'll be your own teacher. You'll know where to bring attention. You'll know how to find that balance. You'll know how to come back into your body when you're disconnected from yourself. You'll know how to awaken presence when you've sunk into yourself too much. You'll know

what to do when you have the hindrances, how to turn on the light. And over time, you'll see that with a light on, with the practice you have, that maybe delightfully you'll notice, oh, maybe Gill's onto something when he said things disappear. Or maybe already you've had those experiences in your life where you disappeared. And it was great. Maybe it was something as simple as going and walking along the Pacific Beach, the Pacific Ocean on the beach, you know, nice day and... After a while, you found out that you were just there, and something disappeared. I think my first disappearing experience was impactful for me was when I was 17, and with some friends we were driving around, traveling around Europe, and that was in the back seat of a, I don't think it was even a seat. It was the back of a Volkswagen van, and looking out the window at the scenery as I went by. And somehow I got absorbed in the scenery, and I didn't know I had disappeared. Right. Until I returned. Wow, that was cool. Wow, that was quite something. I disappeared. Just being absorbed in the activity of the moment.

So I hope that this talk... If it has any meaning for you, I hope for two things. One is that you value the possibility of being your own teacher, that all the information you need for how to practice and how to find your way is available by turning the attention to yourself, to be able to read and feel and sense somatically in other ways. What's happening? And bring practice to that, bring awareness to it. And the other is... that there is a potential and value in disappearing. And why that's useful to say is that we mostly attached to things being a certain way. We want something, we want to be a certain way, we want others to be a certain way, we want something. And even though sometimes we want something to go away, that's very different from this experience of disappearing. Disappearing has no monetary value. It doesn't like, you know, you don't get praised for disappearing. You know, you don't, it's not like good for your ego. But it's invaluable. It's really great. There's a possibility of freedom that it's not a thing. It's not even an experience, kind of. Experience that disappear, and it's great. Come back from vacation and how is your vacation? Oh, it was great. It was the best vacation ever. You want to play it up a little bit for people, because you're supposed to be a good vacationer. How was your vacation? Oh, it was good. I disappeared. That's not going to go over well. What do you mean you disappeared? Oh, I became free. Finally, I was free of myself. That was the vacation. That was the best vacation ever. Okay.

So I hope this was meaningful, what I had to say here. I hope it functioned a little bit like a mirror for you to kind of look at yourself now and see if anything like what I said resonates or points to something. And I thank you for being here. I love these daylongs. And this is the second one we've done now that I've done since the end of the pandemic. And it's very

special to... to have these kinds of days here at IMC. So thank you for being here. And it's the custom on these day longs, that custom at IMC, that it's the people who, a practice here, who care for here. It's the people who practice here or the caretakers for the practice place. And so we ask for about seven or eight volunteers to stay for maybe 10 minutes or so to do the basic tidying up of the place. So it feels like it's cared for when people come tomorrow morning for Sunday morning. So we need some people, maybe like four people to clean bathrooms and some people to tidy up the kitchen and the trash. It's nice if someone vacuums the floor here and... people eight out there and the floor out there someone can sweep. So are there seven, eight people who'd be willing to stay for ten minutes to help with that? So one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Great. And Sally, who's the manager, you can check in with her. She can kind of assign you or ask you to do the different jobs. And then the rest of you, thank you for being here and