

The Long Game of Practice: Conditioning and Skills

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So one of the things well known about mindfulness practice, Buddhist practice, meditation practice in general, is that it's very much based on being present in the present moment. It's a practice that aims to bring us into the present moment more fully, and then to, but not just to be present for its own sake, which sometimes is quite lovely and profound. But to begin utilizing or engaging some of the potential that comes when we can be present for our experience, and some of the potential of mindfulness practice that can be actualized when we're present, when we're in the now, is really something that belongs to the world of time, that the benefits come in the future, that the benefits we're putting in place. We're doing the activities. We're doing the meditation practice in such a way that our benefits will come sometimes, and you know it well into the future.

And so what are those benefits? What else? What is it? What's part of the long game of meditation that we're engaged in here and now? So I'll start with an analogy of raising children. And so I had the experience, I think probably plenty of parents have, of when kids are quite young, two, three, sometimes even four, five, maybe even older sometimes, that we might do a lot of effort to do something wonderful with the children and take them to some wonderful place to some kind of wonderful activity at home.

I spend a lot of time to really do something quite marvellous. And as the kids grow older, they don't remember so many of the things. And what parents can remember were special moments. The kids weren't particularly special for the kids. They remember. And what are so the event, the activity, that the experience, the conscious experience of something doesn't remain for the children in the way sometimes for parents they do.

But what remains is a few things. One is early childhood. Things that the kids don't remember is that they're receiving the conditions, they're being conditioned, they're being influenced or nourished, supported, impacted by the environment they are in. So if the parents

are, or the family, or the environment is creating an environment where the kids feel safe, nurtured, loved, cared for, that creates a very different conditioning for the child. Then if the child grows up with violence and anger and being ignored and being dismissed and all kinds of things, a very different conditioning. If they feel safe and cared for, something can relax, and they feel at home in the world.

They feel comfortable. But if there is war and violence and anger and drunkenness and, you know, chaos and dismissing and ignoring, then they don't feel like they belong. They feel like something's wrong. They feel they have to protect themselves. They feel tense. They feel afraid and that each of those two scenarios creates a very different conditioning.

And that conditioning can last well into a person's whole life. They don't remember all the details, but the conditioning has remained. And some people feel like even before kids learn language and have the words to remember what happened, they're already being conditioned by the environment in that first year of their life in a very deep way. So one of the ways that meditation or Buddhist practice works, really a very important part of it, is that we are putting in place conditions that condition us in a good way, that influence us on this maybe even the subliminal or a deeper kind of physical, heartfelt, emotional level that words and understanding don't do. And so we are beginning to understand: what are the conditions that are supportive now? Being that's one thing, this the conditioning.

The second thing I want to talk about, and I'll bring these two together, is that you also see in young children that a lot of what a childhood is about is learning new skills that they don't know how to crawl, and then they develop the skills for crawling. They don't know how to walk, then they develop skills for walking, maybe with a lot of falling as part of it. They don't know the skills of eating, and then they develop the skills for how to eat. And those skills sometimes develop, you know, in greater detail as they get older. And people who grow up with spoons, eventually get forks, eventually get forks and knives. Maybe when they're introduced to chopsticks, they develop all this physical dexterity of how to eat.

And it's a skill that gets developed. And by the time we're an adult, we're not thinking about that as a skill. It's just kind of an obvious thing that we know how to do. But you watch little kids and you see they're learning how to do this. We learn language. We learn to ride a bicycle.

We learn to put on our clothes for ourselves. And we learn all these different things. We're learning these skills and these skills that we learn, we continue right up until we die. We're still learning skills and how to be in this world. It's a very ordinary human thing to, through repetition, through engagement, that we learn mental skills, physical skills, maybe emo-

tional skills, how to do things. And so part of a Buddhist meditation practice that has to do with time is that we are developing skills, and we get developing the skills of concentration, the skills of mindfulness, developing a whole bunch of skills about knowing what to bring mindfulness to and what to include.

We learn after a while that we should be mindful of the fact that we're drifting off in thought a lot, or we need to be mindful of our attitude as we meditate. Now, people can meditate without realizing that there's an anger, or a part of their mindfulness they're upset with something, or there's an expectation that some wonderful thing is going to happen, or there's some subtle thought that, you know, I can't really do this. This is too difficult, or there's a greed or a desire that's pushing, wanting some wonderful experience. It's all these attitudes there. To learning the skill of recognizing the subtle attitudes that are sometimes even tripping us up as we meditate, or which are having undue influence on how we meditate. And part of the skill is then to learn what conditions to learn that we. It's our job to put in place the proper conditions that nourish us, that support us, that allow for the growth and well-being of who we are.

Meditation is one of those. If you spend your time just watching movies or Netflix or something, or if you only spend your time chasing after making lots of money, or only spend time chasing after anything at all, you name it, and you're preoccupied, busy, involved, then that's a conditioning factor. But if you spend time having a sabbath, having time just to be quiet and still and content with your life as it is, it creates a very different conditioning. If you feel like you always want more, then you're conditioning, you're influencing, you're predisposing yourself that you're always not enough. There's always more to be had. And no matter what you get, there's always more.

If you're conditioning yourself to be content, then you're more likely to be content. You know or recognize that things are content. You don't need more and more and more. And this conditioning is not a brainwashing. It's just taking the good qualities that we have, and in developing this skill, to connect with them more often and remind ourselves more often, and to cultivate the things that bring those about and bring them forth. Because we have, we have the potential of feeding ourselves good influences.

So classically, the Buddha said it's useful to spend time with good spiritual friends, to spend time with people that represent values, represent qualities of being that you want to be influenced by, that you want. You want those to be conditioning factors for yourself. If you spend time only with angry people, only with hostile people, then maybe that's what gets kind of encouraged, and we turn back. So to take care of what comes in, it influences us. And the

more we're in the present moment, the more we can be the custodian, the caretaker of that. And we can make the choices, both the choices about, you know, to do something that's as simple as you know.

There's two freeways here and on the peninsula. There's one-oh-one, and there's two-eighty. And sometimes it's been more or less the same, which one I take may be a little bit longer on two-eighty, and I see that driving down two-eighty, which goes through the sometimes beautiful hillsides, and sometimes a year there's no forests and the mountains on the side, and one-oh-one goes through down through the airport and city, urban areas in a way that's not so inspiring. Parts of it. And so just to go down two-eighty, I just feel better. I just feel more refreshed and relaxed at the end.

But even if I go down one-oh-one where there may be a lot of more traffic and business and smog and stuff, then what conditions do I want to support, to develop inside of me? It isn't just a moral obligation to be patient or be a driver that's generous to other drivers. But what do I want to develop in myself? Maybe I want to develop. I don't want to develop being in a hurry and being impatient and zigzagging out of the traffic to get some place where I need to go as quickly as I can. Maybe what I want to develop is driving in a way where I'm driving safe and content, as if I have lots of time.

And this idea that giving ourselves time and driving in a content way rather than in a discontented way or pressure on in the long game of life, those I begin creating conditions that allow something deeper to unfold, and develop within us. So these two things are a very important part of Buddhist practice in general. That Buddhist practice has a lot to do with putting conditions in place, and it's a lot to do developing the skills to do so. Some of these skills, some of these conditioning factors are things like kindness. So we develop, we develop the skill of being kind. Some of it has to do with letting go.

We develop the skill of letting go. Some of it has to do with, you know, or being generous. And so we cultivate the capacity for generosity, become skilful at learning the art of generosity and how to give wisely. There's all these variety of different things worth kind of developing, the skill at being ethical conduct, the skill of wise speech, which we feel nourished by it. When we've finished speaking it, we feel like we've benefited from it rather than later. We feel so sorry I spoke that way. I was so just mostly complaining the whole time we were together, and I feel a bit drained. And maybe you do, too. And so these are all called skills that we develop. We develop beneficial skills.

So it's not only a matter of showing up and being mindful in the present moment. In developing present moment awareness, then trusting that all the goodness we have will come and

take care of things. It's a little bit magical thinking. We develop mindfulness of the present moment, and then we see more choice, which we live a more considered life. We're more wise about things. Some people put a tremendous emphasis on religious experiences. They're looking to have a great aha moment. They've heard in Buddhism, there's enlightenment, and I want to get that experience of enlightenment, and then everything will be okay forever after, or, you know, I want to have this wonderful religious experience that then I can go round and tell my friends, you know, you know, it's so great what happened to me, and we go on retreat, and this great experience happened, and it was so profound, and so glad I had a profound experience.

It's the wonderful experiences it can have and can arise in practice. And I don't want to diminish their importance, but to overemphasize them at the expense of the ordinary day to day of cultivating skills, cultivating the right conditions, the long game. And some of this conditioning bears fruit far into the future. It's possible that as we develop generosity or contentment or a capacity to be independent, a capacity to be with pain, and not to be reactive and afraid or hostile or contracted. That's a skill, one skilfulness of being with pain. It's one of things I started learning in my early years of Buddhist practice when I was living at Zen Center.

In a variety of different ways, I got the message, and you know Gil, it'd be good if I understood how to be present for pain without the self-pity, the activity, the anger. And I would look for situations where I was feeling a lot of pain, but it was safe to do so. And then I would explore it, and be with it, and develop and develop a skill of being present in an autonomous way, open way without being troubled by the pain. But being wise by it, I mean, was simple things like sometimes we were carrying really heavy objects. I was working on the Zen Center farm, and we had to carry farm implements. And so, you know, allow myself to feel the pain and doing the work without up to a limit. Hopefully the healthy limit but working with that edge, learning about myself, developing that skill. And then later in life I had accidents or had things happen to me where I was in a lot of pain, not because I wanted to be, because it was an accident. And then I had the skill of knowing how to practise with pain, and that was really useful to learn how to let go.

Not because letting go is, you know, as you know, it's a moral obligation. It just you can live a much better, happier life when you let go. That becomes obvious as people get older. I've now come. It seems like I've come into that stage of age, maybe old age, maybe where, with my friends, sometimes we go through. We have a litany, and I think of a litany as, you know, a kind of sacred repetition of a chant or something or piece of something. Anyway, the litany of different physical ailments, how our bodies are changing and shifting as we get older, and

to learn how to let go of all the physical changes that you not let go of how things were and embrace what's happening now. In finding some joy in it, I all that goes now, too. It's this, too, this, too. That's a skill we develop if you've never let go of anything your whole life.

And then something happens in old age when you can no longer have an ability. You can get bitter at the absence of that ability. But if you learn to let go, and learn not only letting go, but letting go into something great, you've developed, you've developed, you've conditioned yourself, you've cultivated and developed a sense of peace and tranquillity, love and goodness here. That letting go is not just letting go into absence or a deprived state. But letting go is letting go into this goodness that's been developed, this goodness that's been allowed to grow and all that. So then, so the skill of letting go comes together with how we've been conditioned, how we've allowed ourselves to be conditioned and grow. Part of the long game of meditation practice.

So the long game and conditioning. What are the conditions you want to have in place? One of the interesting things about Buddhist practice and the teachings of the Buddha is he didn't put a lot of emphasis on causality, like where we are responsible to cause things, cause our meditation practice to develop a certain way, but rather we're responsible for putting the conditions in that allows these for growth. So there's a kind of both a removal responsibility and an addition of responsibility. We're not responsible for what actually happens, but we are responsible for putting the conditions, the best conditions, in place so that something good can happen. So there's a kind of releasing of an obligation, or releasing of a certain kind of self-centered effort to make something happen. It's more like grace. It's more like we receive all this goodness. We make room for it and allow it to grow and happen. And that's one part of the conditions we offer is getting out of the way and allow the goodness to evolve and develop, but we put in the conditions that allow the best conditions for that to happen, so that the best can grow out of us.

And so what are those conditions? So part of a Buddhist spiritual life, it is reflecting and thinking about what conditions can you realistically put into place that supports that long game, that supports that influence you want to have in the condition you and develop. And what skills do you want to develop? Meditation is a skill, and it's done by repetition over and over and over again. The other, you know, went out in a fushrader who taught her recently. A teacher recently had listened to her recently when she was abbess of the San Francisco Zen Center. She sometimes would watch new students come in to meditate and be new students there, and how awkward they were in their physical body sitting in meditation posture, and how they had to move and fidget throughout the meditation session. And then she'd watch

slowly. Over the weeks and months, their bodies would adjust, and they would find a way to sit and eventually they would sit in a very good, balanced, settled Zen posture. They develop a skill slowly over time to cultivate that, you know, settled place.

So there are so many ways some of these skills we developed are done by repetition, over and over and over again. So I'll give you an analogy I've done before. I love it. Has to do with the old fashioned people don't have them any more. I think telephone books that work. Some of them are really fat, and they have very thin paper, and you take a bunch of them and stack them up on the floor. And then if you use them as a prop for a yoga posture, yoga āsana, and one was it at the triangle post. And if you give you a triangle pose, and one arm is posed to reach all the way down to the floor, but it can't get there, you have your arm reached down to the top of the telephone books, and then every day you tear off one page of the book of the books. So each day, it's almost inconsequential the difference. But slowly, in a way, it's imperceptible to you. Slowly, slowly, you are able to bring your hand closer and closer and closer to the floor, until finally you can do the triangle post touching the floor.

So the gradual growth, the patient growth, the patient developing of skills, the great patient development of these inner qualities that support us and influence us, that are mutually supported for us and the world around us: kindness, love, generosity, truthfulness, wise speech, kindness, calm, equanimity, compassion, letting go, relinquishment, seeing clearly, stopping and looking, mindfulness itself. So all this can get lend itself to the deaf. You have to be busy. There's a lot of doing. But the idea of being busy, and a lot of doing, that is not really a good condition to have. That's not a really good influence in this process, and it's not necessarily one of the better skills we want to develop, skills of being busy.

So as we pay attention to all this, there's a self-correcting movement where we start recognizing: What is it? How do we do things? How do we engage in Buddhist practice in all the elements of it so that it has a good influence on us, so that we're developing good skills in the process? And so this is where we come closer and closer to the present moment. Also, rather than thinking of the long game, that we want discover the goodness of what we do in the moment, that we do it as well. There has to be a good feeling that, Oh, this is nourishing, this is supportive, this is not stressful. And so being really busy doing too much, if you really feel and are present for that experience, you can feel all this doesn't work.

So developing skills and putting together conditions, and to doing those things skillfully and in a way that provides conditions of ease and relaxation and enjoyment of this life, that this precious life that we have, and appreciating this, of this. There are our roles in putting it conditions in place and developing skills. It can give a life a tremendous sense of purpose

and value and then it's not such a mystery how spiritual change happens. In fact, one of the signs of maturity in Buddhist practice is a real understanding of how to work with the world of conditioning and the world of skill building, and to engage in that for, you know, for a long time, and slowly slowly something develops and evolves over time. So the benefits that are immediate and the benefits that come through time. And I encourage you from time to time to really consider the long game. And if you do so, then you'll be ready for old age, sickness, and death. And these won't be so frightening or difficult because you've put the conditions in place, and you develop the skills that will support you even through sickness, old age, and death itself. So thank you.

And so an announcement. So I'm starting a retreat this afternoon, a two week retreat. So the next two Sundays I won't be here, but I've invited two wonderful teachers to come and teach. And these are both teachers who have just graduated from their teacher training. So they're relatively new teachers, though, they've got a fair amount of experience already teaching, and they're quite marvellous. I just delight in both of them. And the next week it's Devon Berry, and a week after that is Tara Malay, who's been here for us teaching before, and so I think you'll enjoy them quite a bit. And hearing a different voice and a different, slightly different mindfulness teaching will be. I think you'll appreciate it a lot. And then I'll be back in a few weeks, and I'll and or I'll see some of you in the weekday morning meditations we do. Thank you.