

Practicing with Time

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So warm greetings everyone. Happy to have you all here now. Before the pandemic, we used to broadcast these Sunday morning talks on YouTube, but I never thought about the people on YouTube, but now I do. So now clearly they're right there where the camera is. So thank you for those of you logging in today. So, the topic I want to talk about today is time. It's been on my mind lately.

Now I want to tell you a story from my time at the monastery, Tassajara. I was the kitchen manager, I guess, so I was like the person most responsible for the production of the food and the meals. There was a crew of anywhere from maybe four to sometimes ten, depending on the time of the year, that I supervised. During the retreat time, we had three months of medium retreats. At that time, in Zen, things are highly choreographed. The schedule is really clear and set, and it's kind of like time is one of the teachers in a Zen monastery, because you have to do things on time, and also you have to stop on time.

One of the great challenges was we'd have the fifteen-minute cleaning period—raking the grounds, or sweeping, or doing something—and when the bell rang to end it, you couldn't just keep doing it to finish the job. When time to end happened, you were supposed to stop. It took training people to learn, "Okay, to stop. Next day, you can do it some more." So there was everything choreographed on time. One of the things was the meals, and meals basically had to be served up in the meditation hall at the minute they were supposed to be there, because there was all this ritual beforehand.

The ritual people were chanting and bowing or doing all the stuff, and then sitting there in the meditation hall, just for the meal to come. In order for it all to go smoothly, the meal had to be there right on time. I don't remember exactly when lunch was, but maybe the food had to be ready at the door of the meditation hall at something like twelve fifteen or twelve twenty.

It was kind of hectic to get everything ready. But then one of the rules, one of the practices of the monastery, was that when you worked in the kitchen at noon, exactly at twelve o'clock, everyone had to stop what they were doing, go in front of the kitchen altar, and chant the Heart Sūtra.

Chant this text, and I would regularly, since I was supervising, be aghast and think, "No, we're never going to get done. We have all this stuff to do, and just fifteen minutes before we're supposed to serve up." But you had to do it. So we would chant the Heart Sūtra, and always when we finished chanting, there was more time to get it done—without fail. The meal was always ready. Somehow the sense of time for me was very much tied up in how busy my mind was, how much my mind was concerned with all the things and the desires and the complications. My mind was crowded.

Somehow that crowded impulse of the mind, the pressure of the mind, had a very different feeling about time. Then, after chanting, my mind got calm and settled, and there was more space in my mind, more calm in my mind. It just seemed like, "Yet we have time," and somehow—I don't know if we worked naturally faster or just it was all an illusion to my mind—but we always had time. In the years since then, there have been times when I feel like I'm running out of time. I'm too hectic, too much to do. What am I going to do?

I don't know which foot to stand on because of so much to do. I learned that if that happens, I just do one more thing, and now that seems impossible, right? Which is, sit down to meditate, and I'll meditate for ten minutes, and then when I come up, suddenly, "Oh, there's time. I'll do this now, and I'm still here. I've survived." So it always works out. That's remarkable to do this.

But I had no one waiting for me, so I wasn't like, you know, I took the ten minutes when people were already up in the car ready for me to come. That wouldn't make sense. So time, the sense of time, our relationship to time, is a fascinating topic, an important topic, because a lot of suffering that people have is directly or indirectly connected to the topic of time. If we consider a little bit the nature of time and how well we live in time, and often in subconscious ways, unconscious ways, we start seeing our life in a different way. Some people are time poor, impoverished in time, because time is constantly slipping away, they're running out of time. They didn't have enough time, so they ran out of time for whatever they had to do, or their time has deadlines, and things have to finish before a certain time.

People are struggling with these notions about time. Part of it is the nature of an industrial society. When things started getting reorganized and organized, people started to have to show up at these factories at a particular time, and teams of people had to organize shifts and

all kinds of things. With the industrial form, a kind of idea of scheduled time arose, and there arose the idea of school time. My understanding is that school time was kind of modeled on what happened in factories, and so then school time became very rich and refined. I guess people didn't go to school before that. Their education happened a different way that was not so time-centric.

I remember when in high school the bell rang and we left the classroom, and it was just like this sea of humanity in the hallway, jostling for their way to the next classroom. If you left the classrooms to go somewhere during class, it was really peaceful in the hallways. But you notice this rhythm, that temporal rhythm that we were living in then. Nowadays, monasteries in Japan and America are very time-centric. I don't know if that was always the case. I don't know when that started.

In ancient times in Zen, they knew when to end the morning meditation when the person who could see the bell could look at their palm and see the lines in their palm. That's a kind of different kind of time than waiting for the clock hands to be in a certain position so you know it. We've kind of lived in time. The other day, I was reading about how parts of our society now are running on nanoseconds. There are GPS devices many of us use, right? Many of us depend on GPS devices, GPS devices with these satellites that are twelve thousand miles above the earth.

Every day, there's a time correction because there's a nanosecond difference between those satellites, the time when the satellites, and the time that we live in, and it all needs to be in order for their measurement to work. It has to be exactly the same time. These nanoseconds—portion point ten nanoseconds or something—at the depth of time, difference has to be corrected for four hundred nanoseconds. It's come down to that. I don't think in the time of the Buddha, he thought much about nanoseconds or had to worry about it. It's kind of remarkable.

But it's also remarkable that in my lifetime, how much time has become more and more of a pressing thing, an issue, and an event we live by. It's easy to imagine that we become time poor. We don't have enough time, and now we wish we had more time. Some of it is that there's so much available to us, and there's a kind of hunger for it and expectation we should be able to get to everything that's made available to us. I still remember fondly all kinds of un-timed times in my life when I was young, looking back at it now. There was no Internet. There were no telephones.

What did I do? I'd go the whole day without checking for a message on my phone. Is that legal or possible? I have happy memories now. I didn't think about it then, but now, these

many years later, I actually have a visual memory of walking around San Francisco with lots of time, and the streets being, compared to the traffic now, much more spacious. The whole feeling of the city has changed. That was one of the great values of the monastery, that all the different monasteries and retreat centers I was at, I've been at, is how that a relationship to time changes so radically, so that there's no time pressure, or very little time pressure.

Even though the cooks have to have things on time, there was also lots of space, lots of time. There wasn't so much to do. You weren't supposed to, you know, check the internet and news, and my kids watch TV programs and then their computer, and I'm just amazed how many there seems to be. I mean, it's like you could spend your life watching new TV programs and not get to them all. That would be a sad life, wouldn't it, if you didn't get to them all? The point being that there's so much to do, that can do and work available to us in a way that hasn't been available for people until recent times. It's a phenomenal thing to live in this world.

So it takes some care to learn and navigate the world of time, to learn to navigate the world of all these possibilities that exist for us. Today's topic is time, how to be time rich. If you want to be rich, be rich in time, spacious time. Live in spacious time, not a tight time, contracted time. Live in a kind of boundless time, as opposed to a bounded time that's bounded by all the concerns and needs and duties and responsibilities. One of the things I learned in the monastery was to live in time like this schedule of things that had to be done at a certain time, but do it within spacious time, so the two don't have to be separate from each other.

There's a way to be relaxed, calm, and fully engaged. I was working in the monastery sometimes, very active, engaged work, and there was a sense of spacious time for it. Sometimes time would kind of disappear because of the full engagement in what we were doing. Our meditation is a wonderful reference point for discovering our relationship to time. In many ways, meditation is a time to do something very different than we usually do in our lives. In that difference, have the difference highlighted.

If we're always running around being busy, and it's become second nature to do that, what's the problem? That's what everyone else is doing, too. Then you sit down to meditate, and you feel the cost of that running around. You feel the impact it has of a distracted mind, a tense body. Meditation, because of the contrast, then we can see the busyness in a way we couldn't do when we were living in it. You see it in a different way.

Meditation is a reference point to understand ourselves, and that's a different purpose than thinking meditation is just about becoming calm. It's fine for it to help you become calmer. But if that's what it's all about, you are not going to become wise about how you operate

when you're not calm. If you use meditation, you may start seeing the contrast, the difference. Use it as a standard to really get to know yourself better, what's going on. When we first sit and meditate—well, maybe not first, but sooner or later—most people will notice that their mind is distracted, and then they bring the mind back to the breath.

Then they get distracted again. Come back to the breath, distracted. To be distracted, chances are you're living in time. You're caught up in time in some way. So to ask yourself the question: When you're distracted from the present moment, are you living—are you thinking about the past, kind of living in the past, thinking in the past? Are you thinking about the future?

Are you somehow actively, distractedly thinking about the present? Maybe the present that's not here, but someplace else. Or are you thinking in kind of a mythic, fictional time? You know, fantasies don't exist in time exactly. They can just be a fantasy. Or you might be solving some wonderful problem that's a task or something, writing the great American novel in your head, and so that doesn't—it's like outside of time. So it's kind of—I call it mythic time or fictional time.

Which is your tendency? Which is your default? Where do you tend to go in time when you get distracted? Do you tend, when you get distracted, is it more often in the past? Is it more often in the future? Is it more often about things happening in the present but not here and now? Is it more often you get distracted by what's actually happening?

I know, like, you can sit here and meditate with a room full of people and just have your eyes closed. Now, you know, there are a lot of different kinds of masks that people wear—are wearing right now. I can't remember because my eyes are closed. Let me see if I remember their color and their shape. I wonder if someone had the ideal mask, and I'll try to remember which person had that kind of shape. That's distracted thinking, right? But it's about the present moment.

So where does your mind go? What does it do? If there is a pattern for you, what does that tell you? What does that say about you? If you are mostly thinking about the past, what are the values, what are the priorities, what are the desires, what are the concerns you have that all keep bringing you back into the past? If it's mostly about the future, what are their concerns, what are the values, where is the energy, what is it about the future that keeps pulling you into the future, and so forth for the other ones?

Try to understand oneself deeper. What's going on here for the purpose of meditation? Knowing what it is—not just knowing that you are thinking about the past, future, and so forth,

but to know, "Oh, my past is my pattern, and this is kind of what's driving the pattern"—helps you then to bring your mindfulness to something deeper than the distracted thought. If you're thinking about the past because you still feel hurt about what happened years ago, and you're trying to navigate and negotiate and figure out the hurt, and who did what, and who is to blame, who is responsible, what you could have done, and not just reviewing it, reliving what happened a long time ago—maybe that hurt still festers, and that hurt might need our attention. The hurt is always in the present moment, and if we want to heal the hurt, it's probably not going to be healed by making a better past, thinking about it, but rather to really meet the pain and learn how to sit with that in the present moment.

If we're thinking about the future, some people think about the future because they're planning, and they're anxious about the future. The anxiety is what needs our attention. Or maybe it's delightful anticipation. I know people who just seem to have a joy in anticipating things. My son, one of my sons, was that way. He'd just lay in bed, and he'd be anticipating, planning, and it seemed like that was—sometimes he loved misadventure. He loved building a stage for a play, but the play would never happen. That was beside the point. It was just the building, anticipating, and there was so much fun. Then he built, and then he went to do something else.

So sometimes it's joy that brings us into past and future and being distracted. That's nice. But if you bring your present moment attention into the joy and follow that back to the source, follow that back inside to what's going on, that's a very different movement to arrive in the present moment than continually batting away distracted thoughts and letting go and coming back, letting go, coming back. Because you're getting to the underlying source from which these distracted thoughts are bubbling up, from probably something that's closer, more intimate, and more important, and closer to something valued, really important about yourself. So that's one way meditation can be a reference point and a seeing, understanding what's going on with our distracted thinking.

Another thing about distracted thinking is that there's probably desires involved in them that are time-sensitive, time concerns. So what is that? How does time operate in the concern itself? For example, being anxious and planning in the future—it's because something is, again, time-bounded, and I have to get it done at a certain time, and so let me think about it ahead of time so I can do it fast enough or efficiently enough. So time comes into play. But as we settle down more in meditation, and we're no longer so distracted, but here and present, time can still be an operating concern.

It could be that I'm yet present, but they'd better ring the bell. You know, when is this medi-

tation going to be over? Yes, I've been present, but I've been present long enough, you know. So there may be restlessness coming up, and that's all my wanting something to come to an end. Or it could be that we're trying to get concentrated or calm or something, and so there's an attainment focus about attaining something in the future, hopefully in the next minute or so. But still, it's like leaning into the future and operating on the assumption that you have time in future time, and that you could kind of navigate and try to attain something in the future now. So time is operating again.

We're kind of being navigated, being kind of—it's too strong a language, I said—but we're being led around by time, or caught up in time. What happens if we don't have a future in meditation? What happens if it's just about the present moment? We would then no longer be attaining anything, because attaining is always in the future. It's a little bit of a fantasy, and sometimes we do attain things, we do get calmer. Sometimes we can practice in such a way that good things happen to us, so it's not like it's illegal to do it and impossible to do it, but it is operating in time.

As the mind gets quieter, sooner or later, you'll notice that any concern with the future is a bit of a drag for the mind. Any concern for the future means the mind is activated with a certain activity of thinking, and that thinking—that's time involved. What's fascinating about this is to start discovering how much we are—the time belongs to a conceptual world that we create. At least the time that we experience, the time that we live in, is born in our minds, in how our minds operate. It's not like the time that we live in, the time that we are operating under, is cost-free. It's not like the air that's just always here for us, and we can just breathe and not have to think about it.

There's sometimes an idea that time just exists. There's a big debate in philosophy: does time exist? Does it not exist? How does it exist? What is time? Independent of those kinds of concerns, meditators can learn, as their mind gets quiet, that the very conceiving of things dependent on time takes mental energy. Tendency takes a kind of mental work.

If the mind is quiet enough, we'll see that work as being agitating. If you're super agitated to begin with, the level of agitation about the future is so subtle that its inconsequence doesn't mean anything. I can't take a break. But when the mind is really quiet, we start seeing that the activity of even being concerned about the future takes work. It's agitating. It ripples. It's, you know, on the surface of the mind's lake, thinking about the past, same thing.

If you want to settle more, we let go of past and future, and the way we do it in mindfulness practice—you can just let go of it, of course. But one way is, again, always turning towards what's going on. Where is that work? Where's that pressure? Yes, it feels like there is agitation

or very subtle pressure, or little spikes of stress having to do with this past and future. Where is it now? Can I hold it? Can I bring my attention to it?

So not let go of this first chance you have, but keep coming back and feeling it and sensing it. One of the advantages of doing that—it's kind of like trying to bring you, moving you back to the source, to use a kind of Buddhist language. You're kind of following the stream back to the source. What is that source? Are you following it back? As the mind gets quieter, it's fascinating that even a concern for any kind of subtle concern is a word like, if you're following your breath in-breath, any idea that there's an end to the out-breath is extra. Any idea that you know the beginning of the out-breath just happened is extra.

There's what happens when you're just with the experience of breathing, without a past and future. It can be very peaceful. That can be very settled. No past, no future. Just this moment of the breathing, as if kind of like, it's forever. Of course it isn't forever; it becomes something else and becomes something else. But every new thing is just itself, just that moment, just the experience.

Some people will say that at the moment of experience, time and experience have become no different from each other, but just this time, just this. You can see that, for example, start seeing it. Eating a meal, if you are eating quietly, not talking or on your device, but just eating, lifting a fork up to your mouth—it's kind of gross, right? You're trying to get it up into the mouth in a timely way. But what if there is nothing—you're living just without a past and future? There is, like, an infinite time for bringing that fork up to your mouth. It's qualitatively a different way of experiencing eating than if part of the mind is, you know, a very subtle part of the mind is concerned about the results of the action of getting it up there to the mouth.

You can put it in the mouth and put another mouthful of food on the fork quickly, and start being sensitive, walking down the steps. Each step, each stepping, is without the past, in the future. As that becomes available, that sense of that—you can never do it enough, you can never do it two hundred percent perfectly. But that's not the point, to do it perfectly. The point is to see. Use that as a reference point. You get a sense, "Oh, just close to the present, just this."

Then we see, "Oh, there's still a little bit of greed or desire operating for something to be different in the next moment," or a little bit of pressure to get to the bottom of the steps. Suppose you're just walking down the steps, just walking. When eating, just eating. But I have so many things to do. I can't, you know, I can't just walk down the steps, and I have all this stuff that has to be done, and I have to get there quickly. If I don't, the sky will fall down. Just walking, just this.

But I be ready, and just walking. It's possible you'll discover that if you're walking someplace, and you just walk without future and the past, just this activity is the thing of the moment. When you come to the next activity, you're actually in a better space to meet it, take care of it, be present for it than if you were hurried and came out of breath and have all these things to do. Now how? I'm here, and I have to do this quickly, and so I can move on to the next thing. There have been times when I've started one thing, and as soon as I start that thing, which I've been thinking about for a while to get to, I'm already thinking about the next thing I have to do, or the next two things, or three things I have to do. Now there's this momentum, this habit formation of the mind to live in time, to be concerned about doing and getting and getting to what's in the future.

What's in the future is—it's rather unfortunate how strong it can operate in some people's minds. As we meditate, we get to see all this, and that's hopefully one of the opportunities in meditation—to really see your mind clearly and how it's living in time, its relationship to time, and how much you can put down time and quiet the constant conceptualization, the conceiving of time that we do. One of the fascinating feelings you can get from all this is the feeling that time always begins in the present. That's where time begins. The past begins in the present because we conceive of the past. In a few minutes we'll leave here, and this talk will only exist for you in how you conceive of it, how you remember it, how your mind constructs, reconstructs it being here, what it's like.

When you leave out the door, the talk only exists in some kind of way in your memory. When this talk becomes the past, that past was born here. The past is born in the present. That's a very different idea than with a linear movement from the future on into the future, like a line—the past is behind us and the future is ahead of us. Some cultures have the future coming towards us and then we leave. But what happens if we understand that time, future, time, past, begins in the present?

If that's the case, the present is the source for all time, past and future, in a certain kind of way. If that's the case, how are we going to be responsible? How are we going to be intimate? How are we going to care for ourselves at that important juncture in the present moment where time begins? Are we creating time as a gift? Are we creating time as something that's useful and healthy for us and for others? We are the creators of time, at least for our own minds. We are the creators of the past, the creators of the future in a certain kind of way.

So it gives us a phenomenal vantage point, phenomenal potential to live in the world a very different way around time. If you feel harried by time, if you feel in a hurry in the world of time, you've constructed that time that's been born in your mind. Is that what you want to

have produced in your mind for the world? Is that your gift to the world—a hurried mind, a hurried mind? What happens if you construct a different time? Is there a timeless time? Is there a spacious time? Is there a way of holding the events of your life—past, future, and present—in a wide open time?

That, I think, is one of the gifts of meditation, because to the degree to which we can get calm in meditation, it slows down the incessant kind of rush of thoughts, ideas, constructions, conceiving what the mind does. One of those conceivings is the conceiving of time and time. So you get a sense, you get a feeling, that time is now opened up, is more spacious. That is a valuable place to take care. It's a valuable place to value. To see it is important. See it as a teacher. See it as reflecting on what is important and on your role in staying close to it and your role in losing it.

If you find yourself in a hurry, you've become attached to something. There is no hurrying without attachment, but there can be doing things fast without hurrying. There can be doing things fast without attachment, but you can't hurry without there being attachment. As we slow down in this, become more spacious in time, we have then the opportunity to discover what these attachments are and why do we live with these attachments. Why do we give them so much authority? Why do we think that they are required and so necessary and so important? Follow that idea back to the source. Where does that come from? Where does that arise from in you? What are the beliefs, what are the deeper feelings and emotions that give rise to the attachment that causes hurry?

So there is time poverty, which I think has been growing for our modern society—more impoverished people, impoverished in time. Then there's being rich in time, abundance of time that is only a moment away. We have to be faster these days. It's only a nanosecond away, the abundance of time that's always here. So I hope that this gives you something a little different than usual to be curious about, and consider, and talk to your friends about, and study your mind with. May time become your friend by you becoming friends with time. Thank you.