

Being Your Own Teacher

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Good afternoon and thank you for being here. There's especially for those of you here all day. And I appreciated the meetings I had with some of you. And one of the things that kind of was inspired in me by those meetings I had through the day was how in this practice that we do, of mindfulness, that we are learning how to be our own teachers. We're learning how to rely on our own capacity to find our way in this world, our own capacity to know what to do, what to say, how to be. And that's quite a remarkable purpose of spiritual practice.

And it's kind of summarized for me in a particular teaching that the Buddha gave in the last days of his life, where he's teaching, so what do you say at the end of your life to your disciples, to students? It's usually pretty significant, like you should listen to this. And he said, be a refuge. Make yourself a refuge. Be your own refuge. Be your own support with no other refuge.

Then he went on right away, in the same breath probably, he said, have the Dharma as your refuge. Dharma as your support with no other refuge. He just contradicts himself, no other refuge. The only way to harmonize these two things is that if you and the Dharma are understood to be the same thing, that we're growing into the Dharma or we find the Dharma within us. The Dharma is not separate from us. It's not in a book, you know, that you have to read the book to discover it.

But in a certain way, we discover it in ourselves. We become the Dharma, rather than it being someone else, something outside of us. So that's kind of a powerful statement in itself. And that begs the question, how do you do that? How do you be your own refuge? How do you have the Dharma as the only refuge?

And when the Buddha goes on to say that, he says, and how do you do that? Practicing mindfulness of the body. Practicing mindfulness of feelings, practicing mindfulness of mind states,

practicing mindfulness of what's called the dharma, these mental activities that have a big role to play in whether we're free or not free. And so right near the end of his life, he was pointing to our own capacity for attention, our own capacity for awareness. And he was a little bit more specific, awareness in these four areas of our life. To bring attention to this, this is what allows you to be your own refuge.

This is what allows you to be, in my language, your own teacher. This is where you discover the Dharma. So it begins with mindfulness of the body. And if you remember at the beginning of the day, I emphasize the value of getting grounded in your body, centered in your body, that I like to think of this first foundation of mindfulness, this first of these four, as being the base of a great pyramid. The pyramid is too abstract or too kind of silly, maybe a big mountain. And that it's the foundation of the mountain, the broad, strong foundation that's really big, tremendous volume in that foundation.

And so you want to have that strong and stable. And I would like to suggest that, I don't know what, 80% of Buddhist practice, mindfulness practice, is mindfulness of the body. Or as a Zen teacher, Dōgen, as a famous Zen master in Japan, reworded it, is that mindfulness of the body is the body's mindfulness. Right? So the awareness that arises out of the body to be centered in there, really know it. And that 80% of what we do as mindfulness practitioners is more bodyfulness than it is mindfulness.

Filling the body with awareness, with attention to know what's here. And there's a lot we learn. It's like this idea of becoming our own teacher. A lot that is available and discovered through the body. One is where it can be aware of tension. Right?

We can be aware of contraction. We can be aware of the feeling tones, the sensations, the emotions, the experience we're having in a deeper way that's through the body, as opposed to experiencing our life through our abstract concepts, through our ideas, our projections, our assumptions, our bias. And it can be as simple as paying attention to your posture. That if you're over-eager, you might be leaning forward. If you're over-eager with your hostility, you're ready. Your posture shows.

And if you're paying attention to the mindfulness of the body, if you're really there, you'll notice what your body's doing. And my question, really? Is that what I want to be doing? Or if you're, you know, or you might be that, oh, I don't know about this. Maybe there's a good reason to be cautious, but is that you're overdoing it? Are you losing yourself in this where you're not really present, paying attention, knowing what's happening?

It might be important to be cautious. So the body's telling you that. But you want to stay this

way, kind of like a trapped, a deer trapped in the headlights? Yes. Or you're like, oh, I think I need to kind of relax here, not be so pulled back and be present for the situation. It might be that you feel hungry, but you're so familiar with what the body feels like and the different sensations that you can tell the difference between a hunger, which is because you have a need for food, and physical sensations of hunger that are really a craving or a loneliness, or trying to fill some feeling of feeling kind of empty inside, kind of, psychologically empty, you can feel that difference.

And that's important because if you recognize a difference, maybe you have some better way of filling it than having chips again or whatever it might be. And so there's a lot of information available in the body. And the primary one is that the Buddha emphasized in teaching mindfulness to the body was tension. And the instructions he gives for mindfulness of body is to relax. Relax how the body is tense. Relax, soften the body.

And I mean, maybe it's possible to over-relax, but if you keep a good posture, if you keep a good balanced upright posture, unless you need to lay down, you don't have to worry about being over-relaxed. There's a certain toughness that we need to be upright and present, but you might need to worry about you're too relaxed if you look like a couch potato. There's nothing wrong with that sometimes, but some people overdo this relaxation thing, and it's either a puddle on the floor. It's probably... But the deepest... many years ago I read a study that somehow they'd done it, that the two postures that human beings can relax in the most deeply is the cross-legged meditation posture and the corpse posture in yoga.

And the corpse posture, it seems obvious somehow, that you can relax, but that the cross-legged meditation posture should be one. There's something about having that well-aligned, upright, straight posture that allows for a deep relaxation that cannot happen if you're collapsed over. You might think this is relaxed, but there's a whole layers of tension that can't really be freed from kind of being collapsed. Poor Gil. That's not going to allow for the deepest sense of ease and relaxation. So the idea is not to collapse.

The idea is not to be tense, but the idea is to really be present in a good way in this body. That presence, that attention to the body, allows us then to feel the sensations of the body more fully. And those sensations also are teachers for us. They reveal a lot. They reveal what's activated and how it's activated. I find it really instructive and valuable to know when my thinking has been as activated.

It's up in the head, in the control tower. Swirling around. Sometimes it's centrifugal force inwards. Sometimes it's centrifugal force outwards. Sometimes the activated energy is chaotic up there. And I know there's other ways to think.

There's ways of thinking where I feel centered in myself, quiet, where there's no tension involved with the thinking that I do. And I can think in wonderful ways, sometimes creative ways, useful ways about things in my life. If I have this kind of relaxed, centered, kind of easeful way of thinking... And so to recognize that difference has been really useful for me to know there's these different ways of thinking so that if I find myself feeling getting a headache or feeling activated up there or energized in my head, feeling narrow in my head, contracted in my head around the thinking, oh, I know about that. Oh, I know this. I'm not just thinking. I'm thinking plus something extra.

I'm thinking with tension. I'm thinking with pressure. Yeah. And maybe I don't need to have that tension. It's useful to see that. Usually if I'm thinking with tension, it's also good to take a deeper look at this.

What am I believing? Why do I think it's so important to figure this out, to work this out, to be caught up in this, to question it? Don't give it a free rein without really understand more deeply what is going on here. What's the ecology of this kind of being caught in thoughts? This is a way to be your own teacher. You're learning from yourself and how you work.

You're learning about the underlying beliefs, assumptions we're living under that are fueling our preoccupation. And we can learn we have another way of thinking. One that is when we can stay balanced, relaxed, centered, and that there's a whole different quality of thinking that can go on. And I kind of believe people do their best thinking when thinking is relaxed rather than pressured and under tension. So by feeling a sensation, so we can see, we can feel these kinds of things. We can sometimes, it's only the being in my sensations in my body that I get the early warning signs that I'm getting angry or annoyed.

Early warning signs that I'm afraid or what's going on in some ways. And I find it's been one of the great gifts in my life, this, that Buddhism has had me cultivate a very strong attention to the body. So all these sensations that are swirling and moving that are there, I pick them up early, a heightened sensitivity to them. So I learned so much about myself. I can see what's going on in the present moment, present moment so much better. Then have to wait until full-blown anger, full-blown fear to know that I'm afraid.

When I was much younger, people would look at me and say, Gil, you're angry. No. No way. I had no sense. Self-image of myself capable of being angry. So I kind of, maybe I ignored it, or I don't know if I was repressing it. I don't know what was going on, but I had it. But it took me a while to learn it, then recognize it in myself. And so this mindfulness of the body now is a wonderful teacher for me to show what's going on.

And then, as we're more present for our body, the sensations, the feelings of what's in the body, surprisingly, that also allows us at some point to open up and be more cognizant of our mental state. And I don't know if we want to call it mental state. That's the usual, mind, more commonly in English, they call it mind state. The word in Pāli is *citta*, and some people prefer to translate *citta* as heart. And that feels more heartfelt. But exactly what it is, sometimes just to make it easier, at least for me, I just call it the quality of our inner life.

Where's the mind after all? It's up here. Maybe it's in the heart. Maybe that's too limited. Both those are too limited. But our inner life, where is that? Maybe that's broad enough to encompass all of our inner life, to call it inner life. Right? And so the quality of our inner life, I believe one of the great understandings that I have, is that each person, the only people really responsible for the quality of our inner life is you yourself, responsible for being the caretaker of it, the custodian. You're the caretaker of your inner life.

If you contract it out to someone else, you know, the Uber of the inner life. You call someone up and they'll come in 10 minutes, give you a price, and they'll be sad for you. And, you know, they'll relax for you because you don't have time to relax. So you want to do these things. You contract it out. That doesn't make any sense, right?

Right? Many of us are expecting other people to fix our inner life. If I just get the right person, the right relationship, then it'll be all good in there. Then you're not being your own teacher. And I think the radical offering of Buddhism is you can be your own teacher. You can be your own healer. You can be your own caretaker of this inner life.

And how does that begin? Getting to know it. Mindfulness of the inner life. Mindfulness of the mind state. What's the quality of your mind? What's the quality of your inner state? And there's a lot of answers to that. In this ancient teaching of the Buddha, he gave some things to begin with. And this little bit of my paraphrase, is the inner state settled or unsettled? Is it small and narrow?

Contracted or is it expansive, open? You can have a broad open mind. Sometimes it's called, in Zen, it's called big mind. Is it inner life caught in something or is it free from things? Is it caught up or is it not caught up? Is it... Does the inner life feel off in some way?

Does it feel unsatisfactory in some way? Do they feel like, you know, this doesn't really feel like satisfying for me. This is not right for me. Something seems off. That's invaluable to see. It's very personal, the inner life.

So it's kind of embarrassing that your inner life is off, that it's your... doesn't feel satisfying. I mean, you don't want to blast it out. How are you? Oh, I have very unsatisfying inner life. We

don't, people don't normally don't want to hear that. That's like, what? What do I do with that information? They just want to hear, I'm fine. But that's invaluable if you don't make, throw second arrows at it. If you don't kind of then judge yourself, I'm supposed to be, I've been a Buddhist for three weeks, I should be, I should be, you know, an example of radiant love.

You know, we make it, but to not judge ourselves, then we're not really becoming our own teacher. But with clear eyes, you see, oh, this doesn't feel right, doesn't feel good. It feels unsatisfying in there. It is possible to have a satisfying inner life. The Buddha specifically refers to this, a inner life which feels pleasing. We feel good about it. We're happy about how it feels in there. It's not easy to have that, but it's possible. And it begins by knowing that it feels unsatisfying now. It feels limiting now.

And maybe there's an inner life which is not limited by the kind of things we're caught in. So, is it settled or is it not settled? Is it suffering or not suffering? Is it happy or is it sad? What's going on in there? And then the fact that it's one of the subjects for mindfulness, one of the foundations for being a refuge to ourselves means that there's something about this information we get about our inner state that can guide us, support us.

If the mind is contracted and tight, maybe then the mind can relax. If the mind is unsettled, that's good information so that we can decide, what can I do to settle it? Maybe I need to talk to someone. Just having a conversation with a friend settles something because I'm agitated about something going on in my life. Maybe going for a walk. Okay. Maybe meditating. Who would have thought it? Say quiet. Say meditate for a while.

Or maybe it's journaling. Maybe there's something about that we're dealing with in our life that it would be really good for us, really good to understand better, to really understand what we're concerned with, what's the problem, what's going on in the real world. Sometimes it's good to write about it or talk to a friend about it. Some things shouldn't be done just by meditation. Right? So in different situations, we see we're unsettled, and then we see, okay, how do I address this?

Some people feel quite unsettled, maybe suffering a lot. They almost don't know they're unsettled. They know they're feeling somehow vaguely, very unhappy. But it just seems like one big, bumbling black box that you can't see inside of. What the Buddha is offering in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness is how to break through the black box. So if you have this inner life that doesn't feel good, what does that feel like in your body? Where in your body do you feel that? Practice mindfulness of the body. What are the sensations that it comes with? And then you could also do the Fourth Foundation.

Which is the final step in these four foundations. And that is more than just knowing what's here, it's to start recognizing some of the patterns of thinking, some of the patterns of our inner mental life that are operating, that are present when we're feeling off and when we're feeling just right. When we're feeling off, the Buddha gives a whole bunch of lists of the things that are going on in the mental processes. So if I give you all of them, you won't remember any of them. So just trust me, there's a lot of lists. A lot of lists of these inner processes. But the first one he gives is the five hindrances.

And so it's helpful. These are ones, and you don't have to do that today, but if you want to do mindfulness practice, you should memorize this list because it's a reference point. So I'm feeling off. And is there any hindrance, any going on here? So the first one is, am I craving for something? Is there a longing? Is there a strong desire for something? And is that how I'm caught? I'm restless. I'm unsatisfied because I can't get what I want.

I need to figure out how to get it. Some desires are healthy, some desires are unhealthy, and some healthy desires are unhealthy by how we have them, by how we live by them. There can be the healthiest desire in the world, but there's greed for it. That's not healthy. So what are the desires at play? What are the longings, the cravings?

The second hindrance is aversion. And that might be too mild a word, but this word aversion in Pāli implies hostility. It's not just simply averting. It's more than just not liking something, but it's having some degree of hostility to something, ill-will. And so is there ill-will? And I think ill-will to oneself is unfortunately a bit of an epidemic in this society. Right. Sometimes it's given a very polite name, self-criticism. But it's really worse than that. It's the hostility.

And that can be a hindrance, or it can be a hostility about something else, the weather, other people, anything at all. But is that what we're caught in and what keeps us limited and unsatisfied feeling? There is resistance. There is shutting down, freezing. It's just too much. Collapsing. That's the third of these hindrances. The fourth is, is there a lot of restlessness? Underneath this, something is off. Do you feel really agitated?

Or is there something you regret? Sometimes regrets keep us kind of caught in all kinds of ways. And then the last one is usually in English it's called doubt, but in the ancient language the word is indecisive. Being uncertain or in does not being able to make a decision about all these things. If you're going to be your own teacher, you don't know what to do. Like, what do I do here? You know, which are these hindrances do I have? I don't know. Do I feel my tension right now? Or should I feel my, you know, should I do a *mettā*? Should I, you know, am I supposed to do my body now? Or is it the mind's inner life, you know?

There's so many things to do and I don't know which one. And I don't know. So indecisive. To see that that's operating could be freeing. Just to see it, you step back. Just to know that's what's going on. There's space being made. That's how your own teacher. Now you know where the tension is more better. Maybe now you can relax more, let go, quiet.

And then there's also then, they also said the positive mental states, when there's really, when the inner life is very satisfying, then there are other things that are present. And so the list that he gives there is, You don't have to memorize it, but for this list, you might want to close your eyes and listen to it, finding a reference inside of yourself for what this might feel when these are present for you. Clear awareness, clarity of understanding, vitality, joy, calm, settledness, equanimity. Peace. So those are good things.

One of the teachings of the Buddha is that if any of these are present, even just a little bit, knowing that they're present is the food that lets them grow. And we don't want to let them grow, we don't want to overemphasize them so we don't, not honest about what's difficult for us. This is not like Pali Anish is kind of supposed to be always happy. But it is invaluable to recognize when these things are here so they can support this whole process of being our own teacher. So we have a reference of what's possible and we have a reference of how to practice, how to be mindful, so that the mindfulness itself is not a form of tension. So mindfulness itself is not hijacked by hostility or greed or doubt or indecisiveness. Right. But the mindfulness itself can feel satisfying to do.

So the Buddha said, Be a refuge to yourself. Be your own refuge with no other refuge. Have the Dharma as your refuge with no other refuge. Has that done? Stay aware of your body. Stay aware of your sensations. Stay aware of the quality of your inner life. Stay aware of the mental processes of that are either creating unsatisfactory inner lives, or that it support a radiant inner life. Be your own teacher. So those are my thoughts for today.

And maybe from this day along, you're a little bit more capable of being your own teacher, at least for the rest of the day. If you remember to do it. So you might take this seriously. You might consider for the rest of the day whether being here, the quiet, the practice has created the conditions for you to stay a little bit more in touch with yourself, a little bit more in contact and observant of what's happening for you so that you can, a little bit through the day, the rest of the day, make slightly different choices that come out of being your own teacher. And may it serve you well? And may it be that as you come to the end of the day, prayed for sleep, that you look back upon this day and feel content that it was a day well spent. Thank you.