

## Tuesday Dharma talk

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A friend of mine who's been a Buddhist practitioner for 30 years or so has a tattoo on her ankle, and she's never explained it to me, but the tattoo is located so when she sits cross-legged, it's what she sees on her ankle. She looks down, and it's a tattoo of a tortoise. And... My interpretation of it, maybe for my own sake, I don't know what, I never asked her, is that when she practices, she wants to be reminded that the tortoise wins the race. And someone already today brought up something that's somewhat common for long retreats, like month longs, that you want to start it like a marathon, like you would a marathon, not a hundred yard dash. Right. You want to start at a nice pace.

So the pace, the ways in which we practice, the eagerness, the over-eagerness with which we practice, the way we kind of try to make something happen, attain something. This retreat I'm really going to stay up until 1 p.m. and get up at 3 p.m. And I'm going to be the, you know, the great model of perfect practice. It's a person who does that, probably won't even make it to the end of the month. There's something very profound about laying the foundation for what's going to come, to prepare for the month by certainly allowing some of the things that need to rest in us to rest deeply. Maybe the kind of rest that doesn't require sleep is... But allowing something deep inside.

Some people have a lifetime of exhaustion underneath the layers of ordinary tiredness. All the ordinary tiredness finally quiets down. They get quiet and still, and to their surprise they feel a deep weariness that they didn't even know was there. So rest. Some things need to be healed as a preparation. Yes. And being healed is not a wrong or lesser-than, or... It's quite profound to allow the system of ours to heal. And I think it teaches us a lot about Dharma practice. Maybe all Dharma practice is healing. It's a Dharmic healing.

And one of the things that I think that is a powerful lesson for me is the way in which our biological systems, that's what we are, we're biological systems, can be self-healing. And

the ways that I've healed from injuries, surgeries, illnesses, heartbreak, all kinds of things that I've been injured by is trusting that and creating the conditions for this body, mind, and heart to do what it knows what to do. It knows how to heal. And part of those conditions are to leave things alone and not mess it up. We put a band-aid over a wound so the body is not disturbed by more dirt and picking and stabbing and whatever we do with it. So it's left alone so that natural healing can happen.

Maybe going on a retreat is the equivalent of putting a band-aid over some of the wounds we have, because here you don't keep adding dirt. You don't keep getting it reinfected. Then maybe we don't keep picking it with our constant ruminations, which sometimes is perpetuating our emotional wounds. And so make room for rest, for healing, to appreciate the importance of that. The other part of preparation, taking it slow, is to create a foundation, sensing and knowing, to not kind of follow a technique, right? And then apply the technique in some active way, like the technique of what I did for years was I counted my breath, one to ten.

And it was a wonderful thing for me to do that. But there were times where it was a technique that I aggressively was going to count and just I was going to get concentrated and I would just really huff and puff and get to that count and try to at least get to three. And... And I, you know, I've got plenty of headaches in that way. I crashed and burned in that way. Literally, I kind of reached a kind of meditation rock bottom where I finally just gave up. I didn't know what to do anymore, except I didn't know how to go forward. I didn't know anything. At the time I tried to do something, I messed it up. And so I think I needed to learn that.

So when I reached rock bottom, I was miserable. I just kind of like I give up. And that's when the retreat began. That's when meditation began, when I'd given up. So to learn how to be very simple and to learn, not a technique, but learn to have a profound appreciation for our human capacity for attention, our human capacity to know and to feel. It's kind of like if you're all claustrophobic, cooped up in a winter cabin and feel oppressed by the moldy space. And then finally spring comes and you can open the door and go out and you feel all this fresh air and all this spring air space and openness.

And something inside of us begins to sing. Something lets go, relaxes, something. The air that we breathe in maybe feels healing. Maybe for the first time you can go out and drink from the clean mountain creek, fresh water, as opposed to the water that's been stored in a stale water tank all winter. And it feels like you're getting nourished by the clean, clear water. There's something about awareness. There's a way of offering it. There's a way of opening to it. There's a way of allowing it that is kind of like a nourishment. It's kind of like makes space. It makes, allows for things to happen. It allows for the natural healing to happen. And

that allows for the natural resting to happen. And it allows for a deeper engagement with our inner life, with our spiritual life, with the Dharma life.

And so we have this treasure of attention, of awareness, of being present for our experience, attending to our experience. And to learn how to do that well, it might be more important how we're aware, how we're mindful, than it is that we are mindful or we are aware. Because it's so easy for our practice, our attention practices, to come along with a lot of extra baggage. As I said yesterday, so that could be with strain and tension. It can be with a sense of hopelessness, and this is too difficult, I can't do this. It can come with resistance. It can come with clinging. It can come with aversion that's kind of interpenetrated, the very kind of awareness that we're doing. So how we're aware without any of those is, how can we be aware without anything extra on top of just being aware.

And sometimes it's best to not have any, even to any goal, even any purpose at first in the preparation stage. Just learn to appreciate and treasure and learn how to work out how to sense, feel, how to know, recognize in a way that feels calm, calm knowing, calm sensing, calm feeling. Calm awareness, calmly coming back from a mind wandering off, calmly opening up to feel something more fully. The how is so important. And so we're beginning to kind of find that and recognize, and also to recognize what some of the functioning, what the activities or functioning of awareness is. What is the basis for by which awareness appears and can develop. The functioning of awareness happens through, primarily through this family of capacities we have to know, to recognize, to remember, to understand, more than just to know, to understand the context for something, to understand the purpose we're doing, to understand how and what to bring attention to.

There's a... And to learn how to do that simply, nicely. And then there is sensing, feeling, but through our body. Some people like to use the word experiencing through the body, what's happening, and the basic sensory ways that we can. And those are the ingredients, sensing and knowing, that are present for the whole duration of the Buddhist path, all the way to awakening, where it becomes having or attaining knowledge and vision. There we go. Those two words, knowing and sensing. Knowledge and vision is a kind of a sense. You know, the sight, sight, sense. And so some people feel like... You should have a goal, you should have a purpose, you have to have to have reason for doing all this. And we have it. This is a powerful purpose here. Amazing. One of the great life goals to have, to become free of suffering. One of the great goals to really wake up. One of the great goals of life is to be a human fully, because all of who we are is here and recognized and is present in this movement towards freedom.

And sometimes you don't have to do a lot. There's a place where many of us, unless you're

a kid or something, are really in a hurry. There's some places we go where we just don't do anything. We just kind of stand there and don't look around. Maybe we look around. And lo and behold, we get carried to other places. They have those kinds of places in the airport sometimes. You know, sometimes they're escalators, sometimes they're these flat, or what they're called, when there are these flat sidewalks that roll through, and you stand on them and shh. So one way or the other, the life is like that. And sometimes we're carried along in directions to places we don't want to go. If you don't do anything at all, have no goal, no purpose, no sense of wisdom about what's happening here. And you spend your whole time ruminating. That's a ruminating escalator is going to take you to the basement of the airport. You never find your way out. Leading cause of depression. They say a leading cause is rumination. The way we talk to ourselves, self and not kind, the way we talk to ourselves has a mood music to it, kind of. And we're deeply affected by the mood music. So if the way we talk to ourselves is critical and angry, or the way we talk to ourselves is full of alarm and fear, that mood travels deep into the marrow of our bones, deep into the nervous system, and kind of strengthens that whole feeling, makes it chronic. We have to be very careful about how we think.

And so to sit in the beginning of a retreat, just to be here, in the most simple way, to allow the system to acclimatize itself, to allow the healing, the rest, and to allow us to become familiar with the faculties that are going to be used in practice. Get to know it well. Don't use it for a purpose. Just get to know what it's like to know, what it's like to recognize. Experiment with how you know. If you do knowing through noting, experiment with the inner voice that you use to make the note. I used to have a staccato voice. When I first started learning noting, it was kind of like almost like a jab in the mind. In, breathing. You know, like I was supposed to do it as quickly as I could. It's supposed to get it out, you know, just, you know, get it out, you know. The point was to do it and be finished so you can go do the next one. And that didn't have a good effect. I learned to be, to note in a relaxed way, an open way, without being caught in a goal or trying to do something. There was the bazooka approach to noting. If I note it really well, just blast it out of existence, get rid of it. So to note softly with a voice that you like having, you like hearing this voice, you like how it is, it's comforting, it's nice. You welcome that voice. So how do you know? And so the key one that I think that maybe I'd like to suggest is doable, is to know calmly, calmly and clearly. If you know something, take time to know it calmly, clearly. Oh, this is what's happening. This is what I'm feeling. This is what I'm knowing. It's also possible to sense, to feel physically, calmly. Okay. So the sense of calm carries with it a nice influence. Maybe you're really agitated, really impatient. So what does that feel like in the body? A lot of kind of tense swirling energy and tightness and the

legs feel like they want to bolt. Okay, well let's calmly feel these sensations. Let's know them. Make room for them. Take time, give them permission to be there so they can be calmly felt, calmly known. This is really good mindfulness practice, that whatever's really happening, be present for it, make room for it to be felt, to be known, as if feeling and knowing something is what it most needs, as if it's the biggest gift you can give. And we know that attention is a gift in some circumstances.

I hope all of you have had the occasion to be with a friend or someone who you felt really listened to you, really hurt you, really paid attention to you. You had the really important, difficult things to talk about. And the person said, I'm listening. And yeah, I'm listening. Don't worry. You know, are you listening? Yeah, I'm listening. No problem. I'm listening. Keep going. While they're doing Sudoku on their phone. Yeah. It's kind of hard to believe if they're really listening. You have their attention. It can feel really good. I've been changed in my life by receiving some people's compassion, and they were really there. They were present physically, their posture, their eyes, their face, their heart. I could really feel they were there listening and caring. So to have this listening to ourselves, this sensing and knowing here. And it isn't just you that you're listening to, but it's at each individual thing that arises in experience, no matter what it is, whatever, if it's happening, it's the material for practice. And that's a wonderful principle when being on a retreat like this. Of course, there are things we don't want to see happen on the retreat. You know, we don't want one more time for the toilets to back up and spill out all over. And that would be not, we try not to have that happen during retreats. And there's other things, we can go through a list, but that would just be different, you know. Then you'll be thinking about all of them. But a really nice approach to being on retreat. If it's happening, then that's what practices. That's where the practice is. If it's happening, then this is what I'm going to meet. This is what I get to know. This is where I get to explore feeling and sensing. If it's happening, it's practice. As opposed to if it's practicing, if it's happening, it's wrong. If it's happening, it's a mistake. If a toilet needs to be fixed, someone will. But it's all practice. And so as if everything that everything that's occurring in the present wants to be listened to, wants to be known, wants to be felt. So it's one thing about the toilet overflowing. It's another thing for your fear, anxiety. Maybe what fear anxiety most wants is for you to stop and listen to it, to hear it, to feel it, to be with it, so that your fear feels safe from you. If you're trying to fix it, to make it go away and solve it, it probably doesn't feel good. Okay. But as if fear wants to be known. And as you're doing this knowing and feeling of fear in the body, in the mind, in the heart, at the same time, you're doing this very significant part of what this practice is all about. And that is finding the how to be aware. So the how is nourishing. So the how is deepening. So the how is welcoming all

of who you are. to be present, all of who you are to be included here.

I've been on this Buddhist scene for 50 years, knowing my own practice during that time. It's gone through all kinds of changes and challenges, and I've known a lot of other people. And I don't know if these should be universal generalizations, but some of the things that I've seen is that there are wonderful practices that go very deep, somewhat quickly, but very narrowly. And it's possible to go very far and deep in practice to the point of realization experiences, but where so much has been left off, so much has been unprocessed, undelt with, huge unconscious that people have, and they don't necessarily get to handle or taken care of through this whole Dharma path, because it's so narrow how they're approaching it. I've been around places where the practice was not narrow and deep. It was really broad. It was so broad, so broad. It never went deep. Just like, you know, everything was supposed to be practiced in some kind of way. And I've known places where the practice was broad. And then slowly, in a slower way, it would go deeper and deeper. And then all of who they were were somehow touched and transformed by the deeper experiences of practice. It's almost like we want to prepare ourselves so that we're receptacle for the benefits that come from realization experiences. There's a kind of magical thinking that the experiences themselves are going to do everything we need and we'll be happier after. But if those experiences happen when the whole system is not prepared for it, it might even be wasted on you. So you don't want to exalt these things too much. I know of people who have been read or been pointed to some kind of ultimate state that then they could see or touch or feel and be oriented towards. And they kind of lived that way, and they neither went deep nor broad. They were just kind of in a kind of a zone or something.

What I appreciate so much about the way the Buddha presents these practices, even with the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, it starts with the body. It spreads out into feelings throughout the body. It goes out into the mind, so the mind becomes expansive, and all of the mind is included. And it goes into the deep operating systems of the mind. I see it as this unification process, bringing all of everything together. And so right there, the first instructions in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, knowing and then sensing the body, the whole body, and then relaxing the mental fabrications, relaxing the mental reactivity that's there. But this idea of right there is feel the whole body, and this body of ours is not just a hunk of flesh. The mind, whatever the mind is, I like to think of the mind exists throughout the body. I think it's kind of limiting to call the mind and point to the brain. I think the mind is wherever the nervous system goes. Wherever there are nerves in the body, there the mind is. And it's, you know, it's all over the body. I think it means that my fingernails, there's no mind in my fingernails. It's just, but right

underneath them there are. There is. So this broad opening to the body is not just opening to the physical body as if this physical thing is... It's actually opening up to the lived body, the alive body. Every sensation you feel is a manifestation of being alive. Every sensation you feel is you're feeling your mind in a certain kind of way. So this beginning to go broad, wide, so we can go deeper. And the *Satipaṭṭhāna* goes deep, but to open up. And so in the beginning of retreat, don't be in a hurry. Do the opening up, the broadening out. Feel, sense what's happening here. And I strongly recommend that the breathing be at the middle of it all.

Because of how the breathing is so much of the nexus, as I said yesterday, of all the things, emotions, psychology, motivations, desires, environment, biology. It all comes into play there. And I know it can be challenging to be the breath for some people, for all kinds of really, sometimes serious reasons, very real reasons. But so much of this deepening and opening and good work, healing and resting still can happen with being riding the rhythm of breathing, being with that feeling the breathing through the body and let it spread and open and expand. And the breathing, mindfulness of breathing, is kind of a protection in a variety of ways, but it's kind of a protection from ourselves. Because if you learn how to ride the breath, be with the breath that it's always there as a rhythm, as a thread, as a grounding in the present moment. That can be a protection from wandering off too far into your thoughts, into your stories. If you have a habit of connecting to your breath, after a while that habit is there, so you can't actually get very far away from the breathing and you get lost in your stories too much. You'll catch it earlier and earlier. Come back. But if you can't come back, if the thinking mind is so strong, then the practice is to know that and to feel that. The thinking mind might, what it most wants is to be known as well. It wants to be faith, to be really, it wants to know that you really feel it. A thinking mind that's really strong will have feelings, sensations, since there'll be pressure or tightness, heaviness, agitation. There might be a particular location in the mind, in the head or somewhere where things are dense or tight. Some people have reported to me that when they get lost in thought, it's like the world has gotten dark. But when they wake up from this, like the light has been turned on. So we begin seeing and recognizing not what we're thinking about necessarily, but everything else around the ecology of thinking besides the content. That's sometimes very useful when we're caught too much in thinking. And it's part of this respect to this practice that everything is practice. That too. And you don't know what deep work you're doing. You don't know what your deep subconscious mind and heart needs, where you need to be, what needs to be attended to. And so not to be dismissive of a mind that's overly active and lost in stories. You don't need to think you're a bad Buddhist because of that. You're a good human. That's more important

than being a good Buddhist. So a good human opens to everything and sees it. So, of course, let go. If it's easy to let go. There's a lot of superficial things we think about that we could just as well. I've come to the end of a sitting sometimes and said, wow, Gil, you could have done easily better than that. Easily. I mean, what would, you know, you know... I mean, I can't, I don't want to tell you some of the things I thought about that were didn't have any depth, didn't have any healing involved, had no big important challenge in life. And it was just like, really? I spent 40 minutes thinking about that? I never really got serious. I never, I could have said, okay, let's get started here. But it never occurred to me. I just sat down and I don't know. I don't know where I was. I just sat down in meditation posture. And when the bell rang, I said, oh, that was what not meditating meditation looks like. That was just casual and kind of somehow. So it's easy. It's fine to let go and start again. But when you can't do that, then probably something very profound... is connected to the fact that you're ruminating all the time or really caught up in something and really churning it over and over again. And you don't know what that profound thing is. You don't know the roots of it. But to say, okay, okay, if that's what it is, let me not keep thinking it exactly in an intentional way. Let's deliberately keep thinking about it. But let me feel what's happening here. Let me recognize what's going on emotionally. Okay. Often when there's a lot of thinking, it's the emotions which are the food and the fuel for it. So calmly know the emotion, calmly feel it, calmly feel the tension in the forehead. So everything, this broadness, everything gets to be included. So that's kind of like the reminder, keeping, oh yes, this too will include, because it's important to include everything, all of who we are. And then, when the time is right, there's a deepening. And some of that deepening will happen on its own. You don't have to worry about it. Because it turns out, one way or the other, we're always on an escalator. We're always on a moving platform. But sometimes we're on the wrong one. We want to be on the wholesome one. We want to be on the one that is... where there's goodness in it and compassion and kindness in it, where there's calm, clear willingness to listen and hear and feel and know what's here. And just that is profound, profoundly affects the momentum, the movement of the inner life. You don't have to even want to change. As some of you know, maybe most of you know, I just love this. Similarly, that the Buddha uses for practice of a chicken sitting on her eggs, and that the chicken can not even say, I don't want these chicks to hatch. But if she sits on them properly, they will hatch. And so you might not want to be enlightened, but if you sit on your eggs properly, you will be. You know, if you do the right thing, if you do the Dharma thing, something profound begins to happen. Trust it. Trust yourself. Trust the simplicity of knowing and sensing.

This knowing faculty is a family of things. And one of the forms of knowing that I'd like to



offer it to you is the knowing attunement, knowing how to become attuned. What if you're going to become attuned to yourself? How would you orient yourself? How would you feel that? How would you know what attunement is? If you're going to be attuned to the forest here, walking down a little forest down there in the path, what would it, how would you approach it if you were, what does it mean to be attuned to what's here? I think attunement is to open to something larger, more holistic, more multifaceted, then the thinking mind can know, name and understand. It's taking in everything, all the information that you can, taking in the sights, the sounds, the smells, taking on the activities, taking in yourself. But in a way that it's just to relax and open, then you can attune. To attune yourself to meditation, attune yourself here, there's a different, it's kind of different knowing that's not specific, but it still can be known. Now I'm attuned. Or in other words, is harmony. How do you know you're in harmony? There too, there's not exactly a particular detail that you know, but it's something you know that's kind of general and broad. But it's something you know. Your system can know specifics, and it can know broad kind of gestalt of things. One of the really important notes that I used for myself in some of my long retreats, it seemed like any other note wasn't going to work because it was so very confusing what was happening. And so I would just note it as chaos. Yeah. That was perfect. That was very content. Okay. You know, okay. This is what it is. This is chaos. But, you know, that's not something specific. Or it's very specific, but it includes everything. So sometimes we can know this widely with those. It's kind of abroad, all our faculties. Sometimes we can know something very specific. One of our faculties, the eyes or the ears, hearing. We can know... tension in our body. We can know our whole body is bracing itself, and we can know or feel both, know and feel at the same time, that the feeling of tension, the feeling of bracing really wants to let go, wants release. And then to be attuned, to be in harmony with that desire for release, to allow for it, as opposed to go through your meditation manual, or... When you're tense, relax. And get on with it right away. Don't waste any time, just relax. It's like a command. Then you're a director, you're running the show, and you think you know what's supposed to happen. Maybe you're not supposed to relax. Maybe you can't relax. Maybe there's, if you can't easily calm yourself or relax yourself, maybe there's really good reason why you can't do it. You don't have to be frustrated with yourself or critical of yourself for what you can't do. It just means one more thing to open to. One more thing to say, okay, let me feel and know this. Maybe this needs to be heard, understood, seen. Maybe there's something about opening myself to it that allows it to heal or it to reveal or it to rest or do what it needs to do. We don't know what needs to happen. So let's go towards it, counter-phobic. Let's feel it.

This, one of the core questions that we have in *vipassanā* practice, is a question that's very,

really useful to have, but it's almost like an attitude. And it's a question that you're not really supposed to answer. It's best not to think you're looking for an answer, but it's the question... What is this? What's happening? And the function of the question is not to search for an answer. The function of the question is to do the equivalent in your kind of psyche or something, what I'm going to do now with my body and hands. What is this? Kind of like you lean forward and you open up your arms and you expose your chest and say, I'm here to know this. I'm here to really be present and feel. I'm here to, I'm available. Let it be known. Let me know it. So what is this? And then let it register in feelings, register in the knowing as that comes, as that occurs. And then as we learn this knowing and sensing, there's a deepening, there's a richness, there's a, it opens up to all kinds of dimensions. In one of those dimensions... is like with knowing, is the naturalness of knowing. Knowing doesn't have to be deliberate. It doesn't have to be intentional. The mind is a knowing organ. It just knows things. And the phrase I came up with, I don't know if I came up with it, but the phrase that I like is the cognitive functioning of emptiness. So there's this kind of naturalness that, That just, in the naturalness of the mind, the mind knows. In the naturalness of the mind, the mind feels. And to be present, to allow for this more and more, this naturalness by which it occurs. And if anything is deliberate, it's the deliberate choice to be available here to this. To allow, to make space, to make room. for the simplicity of how the natural knowing operates. The natural sensing can operate. What might be deliberate is where you open up to, where you center yourself on. And one of the deliberate places to do that is with breathing. Be available. Open the door, turn the, pull the curtains. So you can really... sense and feel the natural ways in which we experience breathing in the body, deep in the body, throughout the body, in specific places in the body. And then as you really are sensing it and feeling it, see, make yourself available. This is where quieting the mind, having pauses in all your thinking... Part of the function of why we don't want to be so much involved in the thinking and meditation is that there's a room in the mind for the natural knowing to arise. And you'll start knowing so many different things about the practice, about your experience, about where to put attention. A lot, so much gets revealed. So what gets revealed if you're not... covering over your experience with a lot of thinking and analyzing and story making. What becomes possible? What's possible is a lot of different wonderful things. Some of the things I've talked about here today are there's rest, there's healing, there's deep respect, there's allowing parts of ourselves that don't usually get heard or seen to be deeply heard and seen. It's possible to discover that you're on an escalator, that you didn't know you were on. That's taking you a really nice place. It's possible to know that there's a deepening and deepening of your connection here, not only to yourself, but to something deeper than yourself, maybe the dharma that's here.

It's possible to discover that practice is not something you have to do, but something you allow. You allow the knowing to operate. You allow the sensing and feeling at all to operate. You discover how wonderful it is to be counter-phobic, to open to what is difficult. We discover that everything is practice. If it's happening, if it hasn't happened yet, it's not really relevant for the practice. But if it's happening, it's perfect for practice. And if it happened, it's long gone. Maybe it's not so relevant anymore. If it's happening, that's where the practice is.

So I hope that this talk sensitizes you, awakens in you, a greater curiosity, a greater interest, a greater love for our very human capacity of knowing and sensing and maybe relaxing. So you take your time to more and more appreciate and allow this to operate so it fills you, broadens you, opens you to the width and breadth of who you are in the present moment, here and now. May your capacity to be aware expand outwards to all of who you are so you become whole through this practice. You become unified, deeply attuned, All of who you are in harmony with itself. And don't be in a hurry. Thank you.