

Thursday Dharma talk, week 4

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So, I'm going to share some reflections on daily life practice, kind of varying reflections. So when we started 26 days ago, I think, you know, we all deliberately put aside our cares and concerns for the world. And, of course, some of them sometimes would pop right back up, but we gently put them away. And being on a residential retreat, it's easier to do that than for some of the people on Zoom who are living in their own homes and meeting the situations they have there. Yeah. And at this time in the retreat, you know, many of us are just beginning to make the small, small shift to the mind, to the body, and the way we move, the way the mind moves towards reintegration.

You know, and some of us, not so much. Some of us are still staying quite internal. And you're all very experienced practitioners, and you know what's wise for you. So some of you might be really still the harmonious thing to do to stay very internal for a bit longer. And for some of you, it might be the right time to start opening up the attention a little bit more. You know, taking in the world around us, the life around us, appreciating it, just widening the scope of what we're paying attention to with the same care, the same attention we've been giving to our internal life.

You know, how we do this is an art. And it's an art that can take us some time, a little trial and error. I've made lots of errors in coming out of retreat. And probably the biggest error I've made is talking too much. You know, wanting to say everything, all these amazing things that happened and giving myself a headache in the process. So as we do this, you know, really make the choices, the choices we make as we gradually shift out.

For some of us, we're a lot more settled than we realize even. And so be really conscious of how we make those choices, that they're harmonious to us. We're not in a rush to do it, just take our times. So having said that, I want to start with a little story. There was a young monk

who had been meditating for 26 days in the forest. And he was, his mind was very calm, very, very peaceful.

And, you know, he thought to himself, you know, I feel unshakable like a mountain, you know. And so he went in to see, you know, his teacher for his 10-minute practice discussion. And, you know, this teacher said, is your mind steady? And he said, yep, unshakable like a mountain. And so he sent him to the marketplace. And so in the marketplace, there were children playing, tugging at his robes, merchants yelling.

Somebody even pushed him harshly out of the way. By the time he came back, you know, he was fuming. He was, his face was red as a beet, you know, and, you know, the teacher took one look at him, you know, and laughed, you know, and he said, ah, so in the forest, you know, the mountain stands strong. But in the marketplace, it turns into a little volcano. And your next teacher will be the marketplace. And so as we live here, we'll have... Gil and I won't be here, won't be there, but you will have another teacher, your daily lives.

Okay. One of the mental qualities that sometimes can personify non-clinging is the flexibility of mind. And, you know, Suzuki Roshi, you know, used the famous phrase, not always so. You know, that kind of represents this flexibility of mind. There's nowhere to fixate. Not always so.

And... It's a mind that's not constantly trying to control everything, that's not trying to control its experience. You know, in this retreat, you know, especially here at IRC, we have this amazingly supportive container. You know, everything's so well planned and choreographed, and there's, you know, so little... so-called interruptions, and you all planned so well for a month away, you know, and, but no matter how much we plan and how well choreographed and planned things are, things happen, right? I planned my first month-long retreat. I remember I did such a wonderful job planning for hours, you know, packing everything.

And I forgot all my underwear. And I don't know how that happened, but a couple of days later I got, there was a big envelope with my underwear inside for my husband, right on the board. But, you know, some of you forgot your medicine. Some of you forgot different things, you know. But mostly we just sit, just follow the bells, follow the schedule. And we don't have to make too many choices.

You know, sit, walk, sit, walk, eat, sleep, work meditation, you know, and repeat, right? And... You know, and again, even so, you know, we had three yogis had to leave the retreat. And, you know, maybe none of you noticed the change, you know, that there was anything happened, you know, managers and just handled it so beautifully. You know, they had to adapt, right?

And then we had to shift the jobs. I think we had at least 10 job changes. Right. you know, and so for various reasons. And we just kept having to adapt.

And then, I don't know how many of you know this, but until the last few days, we didn't have a stove and ovens. And yet we all got well fed, right? Because the cooks just were beautifully just adapted to it. And, you know, with so much heart and equanimity and willingness to... to really stay aware during that process instead of contracting an oh no and catastrophizing it. It was just beautiful to watch, really beautiful to watch that. But that's a flexibility of mind.

The mind's going, you know, okay, this happens at this time, this happens here, this is how it's done. But a flexible mind can, you know, work all in and whoops, over here now. You know, that's the beauty of the flexibility of a mind. And probably many of you in Zoom had even more opportunities to practice with that. You know, I've heard some tales. So I want to say one thing about this, one more thing.

It's like we can think of flexibility of mind as a renunciation of a control that we actually don't even have. Right? So I said again, we can think of flexibility of mind as renunciation of a control we don't even have. You know, we just have that delusion, you know, that if we just make the right choices, work hard enough, you know, we can control things. We can, you know, make everything turn out the way we want. even if we know better, you know, and that's the delusion we live with often, the kind of delusion where if we look at it, you know, it's obviously not true, but yet we cling to that.

So for myself, you know... One time after a month-long retreat, I went home, you know, and before the retreat, I was working on a project that was kind of an intense project, required lots of hours, tons of email, you know, and I had this month-long of putting aside my cares, putting aside my concerns, and came back to that. I took a few days to gradually integrate. and set on my computer. And, you know, within hours, my body was tense, my mind was heavy. I was contracted.

You know, and so, you know, I try to relax a little bit, and then I just kind of kept working, pushing through. And then, you know, I had to go to the bathroom, and I stood up, and mindfulness just kicked in, you know, just kicked in, and just, I dropped everything, and I just started walking to the bathroom. everything relaxed. It was just like everything relaxed. You know, I had set it, I set everything down for a few, it was just, you know, half a minute. And I sat down, sat back down in my chair, and I was like really refreshed and relaxed, just from like, you know, a minute of mindfulness.

And so I made a commitment then that every time I got up from my chair, I would do walking

meditation to my next activity. which was usually 20 steps or 25 steps, you know, don't live in a huge place, you know, or, you know, or maybe 50 steps to the car. And that became a lifelong practice for many years now, where it's just habitual. I get up from sitting and, you know, most of the time I drop whatever thoughts, I'm having about what I'm working on. And sometimes it was so hard. You know, it was so hard.

I mean, I knew better than to interrupt the middle of the flow. But often it wasn't the middle of the flow. You know, it was just, I just, I was ready, you know, I just wanted to keep thinking about it. You know, it was the power of craving. It was worse for me than resisting a chocolate chip cookie. It was just so much worse, so much harder. It was amazing. Sometimes I would see that. And what was interesting about it was that I felt that that practice really affected my daily meditation because I was so much in the process of, okay, dropping it. you know, dropping it, dropping it, that when I sat down to meditate, it was so much easier to drop it, to drop my concerns.

Not perfect. I mean, you know, I don't want to exaggerate that, but it definitely helped, helped. Yeah. And, you know, as we all know, you know, from retreat practice, you know, I have a feeling not everybody has had like a steady movement into stillness that never varied, right? You know, we have still sittings, we have lots of movement in the sittings and still sittings. And the idea is to treat both of them with the same amount of care.

to value them with the same amount of value, the same amount of attention to them, whether the mind has a lot of movement or the mind has a lot of stillness. I sometimes like to compare it to a piece of music or a dance. If a dance was always still, it wouldn't be much of a dance. You know, same thing with music. And so in the same way, the mind has a natural shift from movement to stillness, to movement, to stillness. And, you know, we go into daily life, there's a lot of movement around, and there's a lot more movement that needs to happen.

But that doesn't mean that it has to be stressful movement. You know, we may have to do three or four things in a row, you know, that's a movement of the mind. But it doesn't have to be stressful. You know, my early retreats, I found that, you know, whenever I got settled, I didn't want to get up. You know, I didn't want to go walking. You know, it's okay to sit longer if you're really inspired.

But my body would be killing me. And I still didn't want to get up, you know, the... the inertia of whatever we're doing can be strong, and the inertia of activity can be really strong. And, you know, that's why sometimes when we have really active lives, we go to sit down to meditate, and it takes a little bit of time for the mind to settle. The inertia of movement is

really strong. But if we value that movement... We value it with our awareness. That movement is just part of the dance, part of the dance of meditation, part of the dance. It's not a problem.

So changing gears a little bit, you know, we reflect on our own death. You know, I think we, if we reflect on it, we consider that it's going to be, if we have the opportunity, it's going to be a very significant moment for us, right? Right. You know, I can't imagine knowing I'm going to die in a few minutes or in an hour and not, you know, kind of saying, you know, oh, maybe I'll go, you know, get on the internet, you know. So Asha Namuro shared a practice that he did for many years. And, you know, there would be a bell at the end of his 45-minute sit.

And he reflected at the beginning of the sit. He said, okay, this is the last 45 minutes of my life. The very last. The bell would ring in 45 minutes. What do I want my last thought to be? You know, what will my last thought be? Can I drop whatever is on my mind and be ready, ready to go between when the bell rings and by the time it fades? And he said, you know, sometimes it's really surprising what shows up. And do we want our very last thought to be that, you know, those potato chips were craving? You know, what do we want that to be? You know, how important is that moment?

When I was a teenager, I wrote a poem, and I don't have it anymore. I threw all my writings away, but I sort of remembered enough to recreate it. So I'll read it to you. It's called Dying with Dignity. So she reflected on her upcoming death. Okay. wanting to have a beautiful environment for her journey into the unknown. She planned the scene with care, candles glowing, soft cello music, playing, friends gathered clothes, a perfect farewell rehearsed, ending it all with a spontaneous death poem. But death, sly trickster, found her instead on the toilet. No cello, no candles, no... No death poem, just a sudden stop, and a smile as wide as freedom. That's about flexibility of mind, by the way.

The plans we make, the plans we make. They're beautiful, some of the plans we make. They are beautiful. And we shift. We adapt. Another... Again, another shift I'm making here. As I said, these are varied reflections in daily life. It's I wanted to touch on responsibility, you know, the way we respond in the world.

And... You know, during this last month, our responsibilities have been minimal in some way. You know, we've been responsible to ourselves primarily, to our work meditations, our Sangha service, you know, to take care of each other in a certain way, you know, but they've been fairly minimal compared to the responsibilities that maybe some of us come back to. And one of the ways that I think about is that responsibility can have a weight, you know, a feeling of weight, you know, and that, you know, I've lifted weights lightly, you know, a lot

of my life. And, you know, I can do a set of 10. without a problem, right? You know, I kind of know how strong I am. I can do that. I don't get unhappy about it. I just do it. But if I did that all day long, You know, I would feel, you know, I'd feel horrible, right? I'd be injured myself. And that's what we often do with the weight of responsibility. We carry it all day long. We carry it way beyond, you know, when it, then it serves us. You know, yes, we have to meet it. We need to meet it. But we don't have to take it with us all the time. Often so much of the extra... extra stuff we add to responsibility is what causes it to be so heavy.

And so the question is to really explore how we relate to responsibility when it shows up. You know, do we relate to it as something that has to go away for us to be happy? You know, I remember when I... You know, I had a, I worked as a chiropractor for many years, you know, and at a certain point I really, really wanted to quit. And so, you know, the whole idea was, oh, I'm going to be free of responsibility. You know, it's going to be fantastic, you know, I'm going to be free of responsibility, that chasing that freedom. But, you know, there was a period of freedom from that. But other things showed up, right? You know, other things in life. And I picked up lots of responsibility again. You know, that's how life is. And so a relationship to responsibility is we want to have freedom with responsibility, not be free from it. Responsibility is our ability to respond to the world around us, to our situations, to our bodies. And so how do we have a wholesome relationship to responsibility? Or does the idea of responsibility weigh on you, you know, when it's not useful? How do we hold that? Do our hearts contract when we connect with responsibility? Or can we be lighthearted about it?

You know, we can allow responsibility to be infused with a sense of inspiration. You know, the inspiration to help, maybe. Inspiration to create, maybe. To serve. You know, there's lots of wonderful inspirations we can have with responsibility instead of the heaviness, I've got to do this. Oh, you know, this heavy thing. Yeah. You know, Gil pointed to, you know, that this kind of inspiration arises from the yoni, you know, and so responsibility that arises from wanting to respond to the world, wanting to respond to the people in our lives, or even into taking care of our own bodies, you know, coming from the inspiration of care, from something deep within. We can notice the vedanā of responsibility. You know, sometimes is it an unpleasant vedanā we're reacting to? There you go. Dōgen said that even washing rice and preparing vegetables is a practice of responsibility. Nothing is trivial, he said. To handle each grain of rice with care is to take responsibility for the whole Saṅgha. You know, responsibility can be expressed as just being attentive to the task in front of us. It might be many steps. Any repetitive idea of how much more needs to be done is extra. It's not helpful.

A sibling of responsibility that is important to consider or capacity for something. Some-

times... We're not really clear of what our own capacity for something is. And sometimes we're such givers that we overcommit. You know, so really, you know, not comparing ourselves to others. You know, I mean, Gilda so much, so much. And, you know, if I compare myself to him, you know, I feel like really lazy. Yeah. But, you know, we each have a different capacity. You know, my capacity has changed since I've gotten older. You know, 10 years ago I could still stay up all night and be okay the next day. It doesn't happen anymore. I feel the consequences. Yeah. So take care of not being so enthusiastic about doing a lot of different things that you commit beyond what your capacity to be at ease is. Your capacity to stay aware, stay mindful.

So the last topic I want to touch on is about playfulness in Dharma. And... Like a little Zen, Zen little story. A Zen monk went into town to buy vegetables. And at the stall the vendor shouted, Hey monk, don't you practice detachment? You know, then why are you so picky about those carrots? You know, and the monk laughed, you know, and he said, Yes, I practice detachment. That's why I don't cling to bad carrots. Okay. So, he didn't take offense. You know, and you've all seen the quote, read the quote from Zuki Roshi. You know, what we're doing here is so important. We better not take it so seriously.

And so I'll tell you a little about something. I don't know if any of you have ever heard of it Ashrita Furman. He was a student of Sri Shin Moai. A long time, he was a meditator. Ashrita was a meditator for about, has been a meditator for 45 years. Now he's still alive and real active in this. And he's very devoted to practice and he's very devoted to playfulness, just as devoted. And he's, you know, in his life, he has like a regular life. He manages a health food store, has a family. And in his spare time, he has won 600 Guinness World Records, which is a huge amount. He has the largest amount of world records. So he has the world record for the largest amount of world records. Thank you.

And he, you know, I'll give you an example of his playfulness. He, let me see how far so I get it right. He pogo-sticked up the foothills of Mount Fuji for 11 and a half miles. Just to think about it, you know, it's like, all right, where did that come from? He somersaulted. You know, forward rolls, 8,000 forward rolls on the hard ground outside Queen New York, which took him seven hours. You know, and, you know, this stuff, you know, he's a serious, serious concentration, serious physical situation. achievement, but what really gives him joy is the people laughing. He doesn't want praise for how great an athlete he is, but he loves the laughter. He feels that's how he expresses generosity by giving laughter to people, enjoyment to people, lightening their hearts. He said each attempt to a world record for him is a playful meditation. He said it's repetitive, it's focused, and filled with many, many opportunities to

notice the mind wandering. And, you know, it's very similar to the tasks that we do, right? How many of you do repetitive tasks, right? You know, how many of us do focus tasks? And how many have many opportunities to notice the mind wandering? Okay.

And then the last, probably the last thing I'll say is, you know, when we reflect on how easily we cling to me or mine to this body, you know, all it takes is a stomach ache or a headache, and here we are, me or mine. And we can consider that there are 30 trillion human cells in our bodies. I don't know who counted, but somehow they figured that out. There's 38 trillion bacterial cells in our bodies. So from that perspective, we're at least half bacteria. So, you know, the body can be seen as a community, you know, as a symbiosis with our bacteria, an ecology, kind of a saṅgha of cells. Right. you know, working together for a time, you know, the bacteria die off or cells die off, you know, and just like at this retreat center, you know, next month there'll be other yogis coming in, you know, other cells coming in, other bacteria coming in. So as we gradually transition into our daily life, you know, I want to, I hope that you treat your bacteria with kindness. So thank you.

And I'll just say one thing before I do a few announcements. You know, maybe this talk was a bit stimulating, you know, and definitely different pace than we've been using so far in this retreat. So it's a great time to practice flexibility of mind. You know, the mind might be a little bit more stimulated. And so really notice that flexibility as you settle back into a little more stillness, a little more quiet. And the announcements.

Okay, so for those of you in Zoom, tomorrow at 6.15 p.m., there's going to be a Q&A with Gil for the online Saṅgha. And the reason I'm announcing it now is because it's not showing up in the schedule until tomorrow. So some of you are ready to go there. And in the meditation hall, in the Zoom meditation hall. And for those here at IRC, first thing we'd like to ask for a bell ringer, a nine o'clock bell ringer for the next two nights. Could anybody offer to do that? Yeah. Oh, Christine, thank you. Thank you so much. And Gil has posted optional sign-ups. There's a few for tonight and more for tomorrow. So if you're someone who lives locally and sees a lot of Gil, maybe wait a little bit before signing up to give others that are from farther away and not often here had a chance to sign up. Yeah. So thank you. Enjoy your walking period next.