

Unlocked Mind

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So I'd like to begin by thanking all of you for being here. I don't think it's a small thing, especially those of you who have been here all day, a small thing to be here the whole day. And it's a wonderful thing. It can be a challenging thing. And I'm going to tell a short story, kind of a fable, I guess. But to introduce it, I want to say that sometimes it's helpful to think in this practice that we have these three different areas that are kind of being freed up when we do this practice.

We're freeing up the mind. Classically in Buddhism, they talk about freeing the mind from clinging. Right? I think sometimes what we're doing in addition to that, or with that, is we're freeing ourselves from being trapped in the stories we tell ourselves, or stories that we don't tell ourselves but are there between the lines. So freeing up the mind, we're freeing the heart. There's an expression that sometimes is used in our wider scene, the sure heart release, that the good heart's release, that the heart, this good heart we have, is held in check, and has to deal with a lot of conflict, conflictive emotions.

There might be all kinds of challenging things that are bottled up in there, and hurts, and pains, and anger, as well as joys and love. The heart is a huge emotional field that can be confused, but the heart can be set free too—the goodness of the heart. And then we're setting free the belly. The belly doesn't have a strong association, maybe, as the mind and heart have in the West, in English-speaking countries. But the heart, I think of it as a place that, one of the places where we house fear is. And that to have the heart, to have the belly be soft, relaxed, at ease.

To set the belly at ease is to have the heart to feel safe and home, a place of home, a homey depth within. So we're setting these three things free. And maybe this story is a story of setting the mind free. And maybe setting the mind free makes more room, more space, more

compassion, care for the heart to hold this in a wise way. And maybe setting the mind free makes it easier to find out how to be safe, how to be willing to relax the belly. And that with all these three, the wonderful reference point for this work is, if we have it, is a breathing which is at ease.

An easeful breathing. A breathing that breathes itself without any pressure, attention, without any contraction, being held anywhere. But the whole breathing kind of diaphragm, torso, chest, belly, kind of has an ease to it, as it kind of... easefully breathes itself, and it feels free. So are those kind of in the picture for this story? The story is about two people. This is back when they had horrible dungeons and prison cells and high towers, back in the old days.

And they were captured and taken into this cell, dungeon, that had a big door, solid, big solid oak door, and they were going to be put in that room and said, you're all slated to be executed in three days. Your head will be, you know, chopped off. So it's kind of, you know, it's a little bit of a big deal. Who knows why, but that's not the important part of the story. But if you can figure out how to get out of this cell, you'll be free. You can go free and live.

So they were put in the room. The big solid oak door was closed. And either there's no windows to get out, or it's up in a high, high tower, where even if you could get out, there are slots of the barred window. It's a long way to fall. So it's pretty dire. So you have that door is the only way.

And so a door has massive bolts and chains and locks, and especially locks. And so combination locks, all kinds of locks. And so immediately one of the prisoners gets all nervous and all excited and all kind of fix this and deal with it and rushes to the door and begins trying to understand the locks and figure out the combinations and figure out everything, you know. And hardly sleeps for three days. It's just sweating and trying to figure out, because it's pretty serious not to find your way out. And the other one just leans against the wall and snoozes and sits there and just looks at the door and doesn't do anything.

It doesn't seem to be nervous at all, but just at ease and studying the situation and... It's getting close to that, you know, 72-hour mark, and maybe they hear that they're sharpening the axes outside. It's pretty dire. And then at some point, a few minutes before the three days are up, the person who's leaning against the wall just goes and goes up to the door and just pushes it, and it swings open. There were a lot of locks on the door and bars on the door, but none of them were holding the door closed. And the first one was just trying to solve the problem because of all these decorations the door had. But all you had to do was to push.

So the mind is sometimes like that. We feel caught in our stories, caught in our ideas, caught

in the future, caught in the past. We're trying to solve, fix, trying to find the combination to the locks, figure out the right lottery number, figure out how to have the right thing you could have said ten years ago when you had that big event with someone, trying to imagine how to do a better future, figure out something, how to be a better person, how to this and that. Many people are trapped in their minds, trapped in their thoughts, trapped in their stories, repeating them over and over and over again. And you can feel sometimes the pressure to solve, the pressure to get away. There's, you know, there's going to be tension and gripping.

The Buddha talked about the mind free of clinging. And so there can be a lot of clinging to the stories, to the problems that we live with. And a lot of stories are made up. The stories of identity, of who we are. We're all someone, we're all definitely somebody. We're all definitely all kinds of things. But there's one thing to be who you are. It's another thing to tell a story about it and make a story and be purpose and a meaning and all kinds of things to it. And many people are trapped in stories of self, me, myself and mine. So this remarkable story, the door is actually not locked. It's just little to push. Maybe a strong gust of wind would just set it free.

Is it that easy in your mind? What if it's that easy? What if there is no locks. Or maybe the locks are not connected to the... It's not locking the door. Are you mesmerized? Are you caught by the locks? Are you caught with your ideas as a problem? There's an issue. There's something has to happen. Something has to be solved. And is it keeping you kind of in a very small little cell, small little world being caught and tight? Is it possible to somehow... Step outside the open door, go through the door, push it open, and feel the open air, the open space. Is there some, is there right here, right now, a place of freedom from these stories?

And this is what's maybe possible to appreciate when we feel connected to our body, our belly, our hearts. The body is not a story. Connected to your breathing, the simplicity of the physical breathing coming and going. It's so simple to feel grounded on your seat, rooted here, to feel the texture of the air, the quality of the light, to feel the weight of your body, the three-dimensional substantiality of this body here, flesh and bone. Is there some way that you don't have to be caught in your stories? Yes. You don't have to dismiss your stories or disrespect your stories, but also your stories don't come with any locks. Your stories have no weight. They have no shape. They have no texture in and of themselves. Ideas, dreams. What are they? What are these thoughts? They come and they go... We're mesmerized by them, we're taken by them. But they're so, they're like, they're almost nothing. And they're almost everything. What are they? Have you ever had a story that you lived in and you took

your hand to try to touch it? Nothing to touch.

So it is possible to step out of those stories. It is possible to step beyond it when we realize that there's a whole big open field of space, open space, open field, that allows you, then, in this practice, to do the next work of the practice, the more important work, and that is the work of the heart. So the stories don't attract you, distract you from the work of the heart. The heart also has to be set free. To set free the mind, to step out of its limitations, and then discover here and now, what is here in the heart? What are the feelings, the emotions, the joys and the sorrows, the loves and the hates, the hurts, and the care and generosity? What is there? And is that being held in a cell? Is that being held in check? What is it to give the freedom to that? Where it's not a matter of you stepping out of the heart, but for all these emotions, this rich world of emotions that we have, to let them come out of how they've been held in check maybe, that's the deeper work of freedom to set our emotions free, which is a much safer thing to do if our emotions are not wedded to the stories.

The emotions are not wedded to the smallness of the ideas and the concepts and histories and memories and futures we have. A way of setting the emotional life free, so we're not at war with it, not trying to hold it at bay, not blocking it, but letting it flow. And then maybe there's a chance for the stomach to begin relaxing deeply, to soften, to be at ease, to feel at home in this world, feel safe in this world, at least in this world that's you yourself, here. To breathe easily, with ease, and then to tie the beginning of the day to the end, to live in this world that begins now with what you do next, how you meet the next moment, how you step into the next moment. To step into it, to meet the next moment, to meet now, that the way you meet it makes a better world. If you step forward with it trapped in your little prison cell, it's probably not going to make a good world.

If you step into the world with your heart in conflict or tied up in knots or challenged with fear, it's so easy to be that way. But there are other ways. Even with those things, to meet the next moment with friendliness, with generosity, with kindness, with love. It is possible to meet the next moment with mindfulness, with awareness, an awareness which is much richer and spacious and open like the sky if we're not caught in the stories. So, in saying all this... I was a little bit hoping that after a day of practice like this, that maybe something in you could intuit, could sense and feel that right here now there are no locks in your mind that are keeping it closed. You can just take that kind of step forward into this moment, next moment, with a mind, an awareness, a mind that's wide open, curious, available, an awareness which is bigger than your skull. Here, now, curious, what is this world? What is this heart? What is this belly? Finding your way to the heart's relief, release, and the belly's homecoming.

So those are my thoughts. And we have a little bit of time. If any of you would like to ask a question about the practice today, how it went for you, or what I just said, or anything at all, we can maybe take about five, six minutes or so. Yes. But I think if you could use the mic, that would help, especially for my ears. Good to go.

So when I meditate at home, I find that I usually keep my eyes shut. But today, I don't know, it just seemed to work a little better. I was able to drop in a little more easily with my eyes open. And I've had other meditation teachers say, eyes open is the way to do it. And I don't know. I was just curious if you have any perspective on eyes open versus eyes shut.

Well, first I'll say that the way that I was kind of came to understand Vipassana practice and Theravādan practice is that the way to do it, the absolute way to do it, because we're really strict here, is whatever works. So if it works, then do it that way. And so with the eyes open or closed, for me it changes over time. Mostly I keep my eyes closed, but I spent years with my eyes open. And even now sometimes it just feels better to have the eyes open. Sometimes it's better with having closed. So whatever helps you with the practice to help you be present, mindful, you're completely free to go either way. And I think, I just kind of think that people do us a disservice if they say it has to be one way only.

I just have general questions. I see, that needs to be, you need to be let me turn the volume. Try again. My question is, I noticed that after the lunchtime is usually always a sitting meditation. Is that a reason why? This is not the only retreat that I've been to. It's like... After lunch, there's a sitting meditation? Yeah, rather than walking.

Ah, it's a very good question. When I was introduced to that, when I was taught this practice in Burma from my teacher, he, I don't think he said it, I don't know if he said it to other people, but he always, he said it to me. He said, Gil, always walk before you sit. And so, so I always did, but sometimes it's only 10 minutes. I think he had, I think he wanted me longer than that. So yeah, why do we do the sitting? I think that in this kind of urban environment, when there's a lunch break, I think people settle more quickly if they go back and sit than if they do walking. Walking is too close to all the things we do during lunchtime that it just kind of keeps the mind going and activated, thinking a lot.

So I think even though after lunch, people are often very sleepy, so they're falling asleep a lot. And so you're all here, when you come here, you're always welcome while we're having sitting here. You don't have to sit. Whatever works, you can go out in the outer hall. And as long as you're kind of quiet, you can go to walking meditation in the outer hall. You feel connected to everyone and maybe keeps you awake.

I'm just curious because this is not only retreat every time. Oh, I'm just curious because this is not the only retreat. Like, every time I go to retreat day long, it's always like eat and then sit meditation. Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's a great point. I never questioned it. So, thank you. So, we can stop. And it's about 20 minutes before we usually stop. And one of the practices we have here is one of the kind of ethos of Ayatollah