

Monday Dharma Talk

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So, some of you are familiar with something I've been teaching a lot lately, that there's no really good word in *Pāli*, the language that the Buddha spoke, or close to it, that corresponds really well with our English word practice.

English-speaking Buddhists talk about practice a lot. And it's like, you know, what are you practicing? I'm going to practice. I'm practicing. And you can ask people, you know, what are your practices? And they'll tell you.

They'll say, well, I practice Zen, I practice Theravada, I practice insight, I have mindfulness, I practice *samādhi*, I practice *jhāna*, I practice *mettā*. Often it's a technique or it's a tradition that people will say. The most common word that's comparable in how it's used in the ancient language is the word *bhāvanā*. And *bhāvanā* means to grow, to cultivate. And so if you ask people, or if someone asks you, if I ask you, not what your practice is, what are you practicing, but ask you, what are you growing?

Oh, you've come to IRC for a retreat. What are you hoping to grow here? Like probably some of you wouldn't even know how to answer at first because you haven't ever thought about that. And some of you are in Buddhist traditions where you're not supposed to want anything. So how could you want to grow in any way? And so it's confusing.

And so, but that's the language of the ancients, because we're cultivating something. And what that implies is two things, two sides of practice, what we call practice. There is, we're the cultivator of it. We're the cultivator of the plants. We're the growers, we're the gardeners. And so we have to provide the conditions for something to grow.

But we're not exactly responsible for the actual growing. That's nature that takes care of that. We put the conditions so that what's natural can grow and become something within us. And

so we have these two sides of practice. What we offer, which is not making anything happen, but what we offer is to support something to happen, something to grow, something natural. And then there's a natural part of it.

Somewhat similar to that division, to that kind of distinction, is there are two metaphors that are used for the progress of practice, the ongoing nature, the momentum of practice that goes on. And the most common one is to walk. So the *Eightfold Path* is a path to walk. When we did the refuges last night, the word for, I go for refuge, is literally, in *Pāli*, means walk. I walk for refuge.

And I love that because go, you can just get in a car to go somewhere. But to walk, you have to bring your whole self. Your whole self is involved with the walking. And in the ancient world, there was no public transportation in the ancient world. So that you had to, if you wanted to go somewhere, almost 99.9% of the population had to walk. So we bring all of yourself along.

So on one hand there's an idea that we're walking, and the other idea is that at a certain junction, a certain pivot point in the world of this cultivation, this growing that we do, we enter the current of a river that carries us along. And so at the beginning, we're responsible for the momentum. We have to walk. At some point, we're not the walkers anymore. We've entered the river that has a wonderful current, and we're floating in the current. We're being carried by it.

So we're responsible for the walking, but we're not responsible for being carried along in the current. So whether it's a plant that's growing, we're growing goodness, the wholesomeness that Adrian talked about yesterday, that we can cultivate and grow, or whether we've kind of been picked up by the momentum of practice and we're being carried along by it. For the theme of this retreat, we're talking about what we cultivate, and then the insights that come from the cultivation, and the insights are one of the things that grow, one of the things that carry us along.

And the insights are not meant to be something you're supposed to believe, though it's a really good common sense sometimes to understand the world this way, as our three characteristics, but they're not something to believe, they're something to see. So we really are here to have insight, to see deeply into something. And we're creating the conditions for that to happen. We're not trying to make ourselves see. We're not responsible for this particular kind of seeing. We're responsible for creating the conditions, cultivating ourselves, so this amazing thing can happen, that we naturally see something about this world of ours that's very deep.

And so, as Adrian said, the first few days we'll talk about what we're cultivating. And that prepares the ground for what at some point, maybe in this retreat, maybe at some point you'll understand this thing about these three characteristics. And the paradox of it is that what we cultivate is the opposite of the characteristic, of the insights. If the insight is into impermanence, we cultivate a certain kind of, not necessarily permanence, but we cultivate stability, stillness, steadiness, subtleness.

And the kind of odd thing or the paradox is that the more steady we become, the more still we become internally, psychologically, emotionally, in a wonderful, rich way, that creates the conditions for seeing change. So clearly it's the obvious. It's not something you have to believe. It's just like, this is what you see. And you see it in a way that's very impactful.

And so then we come to the opposite. This is the third, the second characteristic is unsatisfactiveness, stress, suffering. And now there's a certain way, a deep way of seeing this, which is not bad news. So, you know, it isn't like we're trying to get you to suffer more by having insight into suffering or unsatisfactoriness. But rather, it's to see something in a way that's very special.

And the way to that, that supports that, is, in fact, to have a sense of well-being. And if you cultivate well-being first, then the *dukkha*, the suffering, the unsatisfactoriness, it's a lot easier to face it. If you don't feel happy to begin with, like if you're depressed, and we tell you, you know, just, you know, it's just, life is just suffering. Well, thanks. And there's no hope. You know, why should I bother now? And everything's unsatisfactory. Well, I know that, I'm depressed.

But it's actually good news when it becomes an insight, we see it. Oh! And then the third characteristic is being able to see something called not-self. And for that, we cultivate confidence, in almost language we're not supposed to use in Buddhism. Almost, we can say it. I'm not really going to say it, kind of. I just won't tell you what I'm not going to say.

It's almost like I'm going to say we want to build a strong self, have a really strong self. But I didn't really say it, I just said. So, I'll settle for confidence. And you don't have to believe this whole not-self thing in Buddhism. It's not meant to be a belief. It's not going to give you the philosophical reasons why it's true. That's kind of besides the point.

What's to the point in the practice we do is to prepare yourself in such a way to be settled enough, calm enough, with clear enough vision, in the present moment enough that you see something that's completely obvious. Wow. Not-self. No one has to tell you, no one has to convince you, it's just like so glaring obvious what you see. And it's not bad news. Each of

these is not bad news.

What they're part of is entering the current, it's part of something growing in us that now begins to carry us into further growth. And you can feel the goodness of it that we're growing. You can feel the goodness of being lifted up and being carried along on the path. And the way it works is that each of these three characteristics, their function is not just to see them and that's the end of the story.

Some people have said something like, well, maybe I should apologize before I say it, but, you know, just to paraphrase these, things change, it sucks, get over it. But, you know, it's almost a sacred thing, these deep insights. It's almost like entering into kind of a wondrous kind of place because the function of these three insights is to help us not cling, not to contract, not to get caught, not for the heart to be frozen or tight or shut down.

Not for the mind to be so preoccupied and caught in things that it's not really functioning intelligently. Each of these things helps the mind let go. And part of the reason why it's so important to do the cultivation practices first, that those are creating the good conditions where already things are beginning to relax, things are beginning to soften. So it becomes easier and easier.

So when you get ready for the insights, you're kind of prepared to let the releasing function of the insights operate. You see change and you're ready to let go. You see the unsatisfactoriness and your system is ready to let go. You see the not-self. And there's a little, people have a little bit of attachment to self. It's true. I don't know if you've heard about this.

And we get, at some point we, you know, we have this insight into not-self, and a whole cascade of attachments begin to let go. And the letting go is great. It's kind of the sacred dimension of this practice. This really, really not holding on, being tight, clinging anymore. So we're cultivating these three, and today I'll talk a little bit more about the first, stability.

And a little bit in creating this retreat that's designed to encourage a certain settling down, and not, you know, the world out there sometimes is created to get us to be more and more spinning around, spinning out, to be more the mind bent out of shape. We get agitated, we get preoccupied, we get, you know, you know, some of us are able, some people are caught up in mental multitasking. You know, the mind is not settled, not steady. It's...

And so it's designed here to be a quiet, simple environment. And so the not talking, not having conversations, simplifies a lot of things. And a lot of things, some people, a lot of what keeps them from settling and relaxing is the agitation or the excitement of conversations. It's the excitement and entertainment of what's on a screen.

And people will spend a lot of time on screens. They used to spend a lot of time in books and newspapers and magazines, but they get kind of riled up by it, quite excited by it. All this input coming in. And the idea here is it's designed to have very relatively little input compared to out in the world, not because we're supposed to be ascetics here, but rather to help the natural mind settle.

The agitated mind settles, and we discover what the natural mind, the natural heart is, when it's left alone and isn't constantly being revved up, revved up, excited, made afraid, made angry. It's quiet, quiet, quiet the mind, quiet the heart. And some of it just happens from being here. I suspect that some of you, if you just didn't meditate at all during these seven days, just kind of were here, didn't do anything really, but eat some meals, walk around the garden, sit on the bench, have tea, that you would be transformed by the end, be like a vacation. You'd be settled.

And so to take that as a reference point, when you do your meditation, remember to do it in a way that supports a settling, supports a quieting. Some people will meditate and it just riles them up because they have expectations, they have demands, they have frustrations, they're measuring themselves, am I there yet, no? And so people get sometimes quite excited in there.

But the idea is to remember we're here to quiet down, to be simple, and to trust a natural process. And I say that so that you don't take so much responsibility. I think some of the reason why people get tripped up by doing this practice is they think they're supposed to be the one who does it. You know, it's meditate by numbers. Just tell me the steps and I'm going to do it and I'll be happy ever after.

But that's not how it's done. We don't grow a garden by the numbers. We grow a garden by nurturing and supporting and caring for the natural life that's there. And so the same thing here. We're trying to care for the naturalness of ourselves, the natural life that's here. And so we're learning how to support a steadying, a quieting, a reassuring of ourselves that it's okay, you're okay, it's good.

And so the simplicity of the life here, and then the meditation, and the meditation that's one of the functions in the first days here, is to be reassuring or settling to support this kind of quieting down, this stability. And some of that stability is physical. And I think that can be very nice when you sit to meditate to search for someplace, maybe in your lower torso, on the bottom half of your torso, where you can feel some stability, some solidity, like, oh, this feels like there's some substance here, or weight here, or something, and have that as a reference point.

So everything above it can rest onto that stability, that foundation. And especially what can rest is the heart, which can be quite in turmoil sometimes, and also the thinking mind, which can be quite also very activated. And to be reassuring for these activated parts of us, it's okay, we're here. The stability is here to support you, the stability is here to remind you, you're here, you're rooted, you're present.

And some people, when they do a walking meditation, really emphasize the contact of the soles of the feet against the ground, against the floor. Some people find that the stability, the steadiness, the firmness, the weight of each foot can be very reassuring for the whole system. I'm here, I'm here, I'm not there. I'm not still in that crazy situation that was so hard that I keep thinking about. No, I'm here, here.

And so to be here in a way that's reassuring that here is good, here is a good place. We're hoping that this place here feels like a reassuring, safe place for you. If it doesn't, please talk to us and we'll see what we can do to support that and try to help you so that you get this kind of effect of steadying, steadying.

There's a lot of people who associate meditation with concentration, and that's okay. But what's very interesting is that the word, some of the words that the Buddha used in *Pāli* that get translated as concentration literally mean steady or settled rather than the English word concentration. So concentration has this effect. It's not supposed to be this laser focus. It's rather a whole body settling, whole body steadying.

So to hear this, I'm hoping by teaching this, that maybe you'll get interested in steadying yourself physically. Be here in such a way that, oh, a physical embodied steadying. I can do that. I can't control my mind. I've tried all day. But I can at least physically sit in a posture, feel where there's, where I feel, how I feel rooted here. Feel how I can be steadied here physically.

And, you know, sometimes taking a deep breath and then releasing on the exhale and settling, relaxing. Ah, we're here now. And there's something I call the three-breath journey. Just don't be very ambitious. Just try to be with three breaths. Count them. One, two, three. Maybe two, three.

To really be there for it. And don't try to do anything fancy. Maybe take a little bit deeper breath so that you can have a longer exhale. Maybe take a normal breath. But just to really be there for that. And that's sometimes enough to get steady, to do it. That just three breaths can be enough to feel something, okay, now I'm a little bit more here.

And if you understand that the purpose is to steady yourself, is to root yourself, to stabilize

yourself, those three breaths might help you kind of to enter into the inner world, enter into the body and feel it there. Steady. Steady.

I was told this story. I love this story. There was a Zen master here in this area. He used to teach in Santa Cruz. I used to go down to see him in 1977. He gave Zen Dharma talks.

And so he was a local Zen master named Kobanchino. And he also had studied the way of archery. So he was invited to Esalen, which is this retreat center down the Big Sur coast on these cliffs overlooking the entire Pacific, seems like. And he was asked to go on the lawn there and to demonstrate the way, the practice, the spiritual engagement with archery.

And so he put on his special Zen archery uniform and came with this beautiful big bow and arrow. And a large group of people came to watch him because this was a very special event. And he did an inordinate amount of time steadying himself physically, orienting himself, being settled, composing himself, becoming composed, quieting his mind, getting ready. And apparently, you know, the way he did it, everyone was mesmerized.

Everyone was right there with him. Like, this was like quiet. It was like, it was like a beautiful dance or a beautiful, you know, someone who was so skilled and could... his whole body and mind seemed to be gathering and settling and getting composed in a way that many people haven't seen before. To see this was quite something, I was told.

And it was time to put his arrow on the bow and put it against the string. And everything was done with tremendous care, tremendous attention, just this was the most important thing in the world. And he's there and he pulls back the arrow, he pulls it back. It's a long time, again, really looking at the target, really breathing and getting centered and really zeroing in, becoming maybe one with the target. I don't know what he did, but he was really, you know, and finally, I think everyone kind of like their minds were right there, something when the arrow shot and let go.

I think everybody's mind kind of released a little bit and bingo. He hit the target right in the middle, the Pacific Ocean. The point was not the target. The point was his way of being steady and stable there. So you can do this too.

What I'd like to suggest is that there's actually simple things you can do again and again that maybe are easier than trying to, as a mental exercise, try to be with every breath that you do. A mental exercise of being mindful of every moment here. Maybe bodyfulness to every moment here, remember to get rooted. I'm here, settled. Where can you feel settled?

At the end of the exhale, is there some settling, settling place there? Is there some place of stability there at the very end of the exhale that then is the foundation out of which the inhale

arises? When the inhale is full, not that you're breathing extra full, but just normal breath, when you get to the top of the inhale, is there something reassuring? Is there something strong? Is there something stable? Something full that feels like...

If you feel the embodiment of it, it has a kind of... it feels a little bit like what I'm talking about today. And so you're there, every breath to feel it, every step when you walk. And then we do use our mind in this practice. But how do you use your mind? Can the way you use your mind, are you doing it to accomplish something or to support something?

Are you trying to make something happen? Or are you trying to support a steadying, a settling, a quieting of the mind and heart and body? So one thing you can do is, if it happens to be that you're one of those human beings who occasionally talks to yourself, you know, you occasionally have some thoughts. When those come along, think them like you're in the library. In the old days, in the library you talked quietly.

And so talk quietly, talk reassuringly. Change the tone of your voice. Some people don't even know the tone of their voice when they think in words. And sometimes those words can be harsh. Sometimes they can be quite difficult. Sometimes the words are spoken with the tremor of fear. Sometimes they're spoken with kind of rattleness of being confused. Sometimes they're full of desire. Sometimes they're full of aversion, hate even.

Can you, in some reasonable, simple way, like you would be if you were at the library, or I use the example of what it was like to be in my son's preschool class when all the kids were napping. I mean, this is like, to have preschool kids nap, I mean, you don't want to disturb that. I mean, that's like precious. So if you have to talk with a teacher or something, you talk really softly and kindly, and it's a natural thing to do.

I mean, it's not like I'm forcing, pretending or anything. There's a way that you can talk nicely to yourself without pretending. You're worth it. You're an important person. Can you talk, if you're going to be thinking anyway, can you think in ways that are settling, quieting? Can you think about what the practice is?

Can you give yourself simple instructions? Oh, here. Let's be here. Let's be rooted. Let's be centered here. Let's feel the exhale all the way to the end. Let's feel the fullness of the top of the inhale. Let's feel what's happening. Let's know what's happening.

So, as I'm sitting here, I have a teeny little ache in my knee. So, let's just use that as an example. I probably wouldn't even have recognized it unless I was looking for an example in me. There's a teeny little ache. So I could go, my mindfulness can be, oh no, an ache. And this does not, this is not going to go well. This is now, I'm going to, pretty soon it's going to be a

gangrene.

You know, so that's one way, the mind, the catastrophe mind. The other mind is... You know, the task at the beginning of your retreat is to steady, is to quiet, is to settle, to be reassuring in a genuine kind of nice way, not to pretend, not to be Pollyannish. But why not say to yourself, oh, there's an ache? Let me now feel the ache in a steady, simple way.

What it's like to be kind of quiet and still and just kind of feel or enter that ache with a kind of a steady feeling, a steady attention, a steady sensing. Let me sense the pain, the ache, in a steady, stable way. What would that be like, to have a certain kind of sensing in that knee and let the sensing be settled, quiet, stable? It's for you to find out how, but you can ask yourself that question.

If you don't ask yourself that question, the danger is that the old habits of how your mind operates are going to be right there with your attention to the ache. Kind of almost sub-consciously, you might be catastrophizing. You might be hating it. You might be thinking, I should go, I shouldn't be here at the retreat center when I have aches in my knee. I should really be at the... you fill in the blank.

Mm-hmm. Being at the clinic. Oh, the clinic. I was thinking of the beach. And everyone has their own favorite ideas. But some of these unconscious, subconscious ways we operate don't help us to get settled. They do the opposite.

Within reason, it's okay to kind of take it into your own hands a little bit and begin to be reassuring and settling. Okay, let me just feel this ache, steady myself there with it. And that steadiness can be done in three ways, the three practices that the Buddha most emphasized. We can know it's an ache. Let me know it calmly. Let me just look at, what does it mean to calmly know an ache?

Have I ever, ever felt an ache in my life? Or is it always like an ache means danger, and so I always get a little activated? So what's it like to know it calmly? Calmly know. Calmly know the inhale. Calmly know the exhale. You might not be able to make yourself calm, but to the degree to which knowing something is an intentional act, can you, just like you would in the preschool or in the library, can you kind of say it calmly, oh, an ache. There's an ache.

As opposed to, oh no, there's an ache. Oh, there's an ache. The rest of you might be agitated still, but does everything have to be agitated? This whole teaching of self, what we learn is how strongly we identify with our states of mind, with our emotions, with our beliefs, with the quality and characteristics of our mind, so that we believe we have to kind of go along with these difficult states that we're in, because we think we're it. We're not it.

You don't have to be loyal to your anxiety and continue it. You don't have to be loyal to your aversion and continue it. It can arise, but when you know that you have anxiety, know it calmly. Experiment. Look, try to experiment, see, well, I know I'm anxious, and anxiety makes me anxious. But can I know my anxiety calmly?

So it would be like, yes, yes, I'm anxious. That was getting close. That was kind of calm. Can I know it even more calm? Maybe I can say it slower. I am anxious. Can I do even simpler? Anxious.

This is one of the techniques of this form of mindfulness, is to use simple one-word thoughts to help you be present. I used to have the staccato approach too, to use mental notes. I thought the more you did, the more per minute, the better. And that doesn't work. Because the whole point is to do things in a way that steadies you, settles you, allows you a certain kind of quiet intimacy with the experience.

Oh, so you have that... You're anxious? Know it. Oh, anxious. Anxious. At least that part of your world is not anxious. It's calm. Just a very simple, innocent, quiet aspect of your experience, which is called knowing. The knowing doesn't have to be caught in the anxiety, it just knows it calmly.

Then the Buddha talked about knowing. He also talked about sensing. Can you sense something calmly? Can you sense it simply, gently, gently sense the pain in your knee? Now, it's possible. Some people can play with how close they get to pain. Sometimes it's easier to gently sense it if you imagine that you're sensing it from 10 feet away or one foot away or some inches away.

Sometimes it's easier to sense it calmly and peacefully if you imagine that you can place your attention right into the middle of where the pain is and like there's a chair waiting for you, you just sit down there in the middle of the pain, and that way it can be easier to feel it. So the distance you're at with it, really close, really far away, and see where can you know pain, sense it and feel it, in a simple, gentle way.

So what I'm suggesting here is that the acts of attention that we do, that we call mindfulness, that we have some agency in adjusting how we know, how we sense, how we're mindful every moment, and to do it in such a way that it's part of the project of reassuring something really deep inside. It's okay. You're okay. I'm here. I'm here with you. You say to yourself, I'm here with you. I'm here to support you. I'll accompany you through this. Steady, quiet, calm, stable. Be rooted here. Yes, yes.

And so slowly, the thinking mind that spins us out so much begins to relax. The problem is

not our thinking. I don't know if there's any problem, but if there's a problem, it's the tension that is the source of the thinking. You know, I've maybe used this example too often, but it's kind of like if you unscrew the cap from the toothpaste, a full toothpaste, and you squeeze and keep squeezing, the toothpaste will just keep coming out. Even if you wipe it away to stop it, like let go of it, it's going to keep coming. You have to stop squeezing.

So it's kind of like thinking is there's a toothpaste. You know, it's thinking kind of like toothpaste, and there's a tube inside, you know, and we're like, we've gripped the tube, we're clinging to the tube. There's a tightness, a contraction, a narrowness of the mind around this whole thinking. So of course you're going to keep thinking if you're tense. Of course you're going to keep thinking if you're contracted and tight, because that's what, it's just kind of like the tube's being squeezed.

So can you... Can you be reassuring to this thinking mind? Let it know it's okay, you can quiet down. Can you feel the tension, the tightness of thinking, and relax the thinking mind, the thinking muscle? Sometimes it's very interesting to feel how thinking, a lot of thinking, kind of brings the center of attention up into the head.

It's particularly interesting to watch it if you are really rooted and quiet and centered and at ease with yourself. And then, you know, because your mind has a mind of its own, it suddenly brings up some ancient vendetta that you haven't had for 40 years. And you can watch the energy, it's going to go, or the anger, up into the head. And there you are, up in the head.

So you can feel that instability, feel that kind of upwelling sensations, and be reassuring. Hey, it's okay. It's okay. You can relax. That was 40 years ago. We're here. It's safe here. It's quiet here. It's okay to settle.

So to think of these first days as a time of deep reassurance, deep stability, deep orientation towards steadying yourself over and over again, steadying yourself in the present moment, rooting yourself in this place that you're sitting, this place where you're standing. If you're in the line for the food, you know, you can kind of look over people's shoulders, kind of see what's there and count how many carrots and wonder if it's enough for me, and, you know, and that just keeps you kind of agitated.

Just be in that spot where you're standing. Be your spot, the soles of your feet. Just here, physically here. Feel the weight of your body here. Notice how you're thinking, more than what you're thinking about. And can you adjust how you think so it supports the process of settling, steadying, being here?

And some of you know that when my mind is really busy, I'm very fond of the practice of just

telling myself the word here, H-E-R-E, here. And I do it very calmly and peacefully, kindly, here. And then I remind myself, I'm actually here. And then when I say it, I say it as if I'm kind of opening myself up really wide to feel and discover what here is like.

And it's so effective that I think it might work for about half a second. And then the mind is off and running again. And then I say here. And if I do that for a while, something begins to relax. And the thinking muscle relaxes and quiesces. And after a while, I thought, okay, now I'm here. I've arrived. And I don't have to say here anymore because I'm here.

So this stabilizing, settling, arriving, being here, and becoming a connoisseur of what it's like to be here in a stable, steady, quiet, calm way, really get to know it. Then in the course of the day, there'll be different qualities of here, different qualities of being stable, different qualities of being steadied or calm. Expect it to change.

But start recognizing how it is, because when there's something wholesome, something good in this practice, part of what waters the plant, part of what nourishes the growth of something wholesome, is recognizing that it's here. And so what I'm saying is that to some degree you have some agency about how stable, steady, quiet you can actually be. Use your agency and use it in a way that supports the stable, quieting, steadiness.

And then as that begins to happen to you in some deeper way, recognize it, take time to feel it. How does stability really, when you start feeling it a little bit, get to know it better. How does it spread in your body? What does steadiness feel like? How can steadiness grow? How can you eat your supper like the Zen master shot the arrow?

The target is smaller. Really to be there every moment. Every moment is art. Every moment is the way. Every moment is the practice. Every moment is invaluable for the purpose of being really here for yourself, for this experience. Steady, stable and quiet.

So thank you. And let's do that for at least three breaths. And then I'll ring the bell in about a minute.