

Stories of Practice (1 of 5) No Distractions

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Hello and welcome to this Monday, the beginning of a new series. For this week, I don't really have a theme that I'd like, particularly, that I want to follow. Rather, given how much I've taught this year about first samadhi and insight and building on that and kind of more deeper teachings of insight last time I was here, coming out of the retreat this last week and being here for this Thanksgiving week, I don't want to focus on a teaching, but rather I want to talk a little bit more personally, to share some of the stories of my experience of practicing over the years.

It was a little bit inspired by having breakfast with the resident volunteers at the retreat center. I was at the retreat last week, and there are people who live there, residents who care for the place, and the custom is, some of the mornings of the retreat, to have breakfast with them, and we chat and talk about all kinds of things. But it's not unusual to have discussions about practice and practice stories, so to continue that.

So, one of the stories that people like to talk about, and it was kind of fun to talk about, but also very instructive, is to talk about the challenges of practice and how “Practicing” can be the location, the place, the circumstances for practicing meditation. Practicing on retreat, is not so ideal, seemingly. But it may be ideal, the ideal being there should be silence, a place that shouldn't be disturbed by anything, that's quiet, that that's somehow ideal.

But when I was introduced to insight meditation in Thailand, that was not the message that I got. I didn't get the message that we were supposed to somehow separate ourselves from the world and be in pristinely perfect, silent, still, peaceful environments to meditate. We were supposed to learn to meditate, learn to be mindful in the midst of whatever life brings us. It wasn't that we were supposed to go find noisy street corners to meditate on, but we were supposed to just practice with whatever circumstances there were. And nothing was considered a distraction, just one more thing to be mindful of.

And one of the first surprises I had of seeing this, the first time I went to Thailand and was introduced to Insight Meditation, during that time I was taken by a western monk to the large headquarters of the biggest sect of Thai Buddhism. There's two or three sects, depending on how you count. The biggest one is called Mahānikāi. They have a big campus in the middle of Bangkok next to the river, which has this huge kind of apartment building, kind of dormitory, where many monks live, on many floors.

For some reason, we went there to visit another monk who was up on the fifth floor or something. So we come from the street, through the front door, to this very big lobby. The lobby had just tremendous amount of people coming and going. What I do remember was there was kind of a stairway, curving spiral stairs that were going up to the second floor. I think it just kept going up, floor after floor.

There was a desk, a very large desk, kind of an entryway on the side, not facing the door, but perpendicular, where a monk sat as a receptionist, receiving people. There were like six telephones, wired telephones on the desk, and lots of phones ringing, people calling, him talking. There was a lot of yelling. And there were a lot of people coming and going in that lobby, up and down, this way and that. It was a very busy place. You know, it was right in Bangkok. People were coming and going. Monks were coming and going.

Then on the far end, as far from the door as you could be, the front door, under those steps that were going up, there were about a dozen lay people meditating, on retreat. And they were just sitting completely still and quiet in this very public place, because there was no, I guess, meditation hall for lay people like that. I don't know

quite the reason why they were sitting meditating there. But they were sitting completely still and quiet, seemingly undisturbed by all the commotion going on there. They were practicing mindfulness, insight.

I was so inspired by that. I had come from doing years of monastic life deep in the wilderness, deep in the mountains, where things were kind of pristine and beautiful and inspiring in many ways. But to see that we could practice insight right there in this busyness, that was very inspiring and instructive for me.

When I was in Burma, practicing long retreats there, the longest retreat I ever sat was eight months in Burma. Mostly that was alone, in my room, and walking meditation in the hallway in front of my room. It was one of the happiest times in my life to be able to devote myself so fully to the practice. But it was in the middle of Rangoon, and it was kind of a community college campus in a very big monastery. The facilities I was staying in were a little bit close to the edge of the monastery.

In the town around it, a number of places, including some of the local Buddhist temples, had loudspeakers. The loudspeakers back then were kind of raspy or poor quality loudspeakers. So the music came crackling through. Most of the time there was Burmese pop music, being played over and over and over again. Madonna's song, Like a Virgin, was... luckily they were singing it in Burmese. But they played that over and over and over again.

And here I was at one of the most famous insight meditation monasteries in the world, the kind of the origin of the kind of insight meditation that many of us practice and teach here in the West. A place where, you know, sometimes there were thousands of people meditating there, and there was this constant blaring of these poor quality loudspeakers, mostly pop music.

And for one week there was a Buddhist festival and twenty-four hours a day for seven days there were Buddhist monks chanting the Abhidhamma —the Abhidharma, the Buddhist texts on Buddhist psychology, which are very, very dry — chanting it in Pali, you couldn't understand what they were saying. It was very monotone and dry and just going on, droning on and on, day and night. And even there, that was understood to be just one more thing to practice with.

To inspire us with this kind of idea, the abbot, U Pandita, told the story of the turning point for him when he started doing insight practice. He had been a monk since he was a teenager, quite young, teenager. He'd gone through all this monastic study and was very well learned. And then he was ready to start practicing meditation as an adult at some point, and he went on a retreat.

This teacher, U Pandita, looked like he should have been a general in the army. He was kind of strong and determined and stern and, you know, was a very strong motivation and fire kind of guy, just his personality, so he was going to practice in a very determined way.

He had a roommate. And his roommate always went to bed early. In that tradition, you were supposed to only sleep four hours a night. But his roommate didn't do this; he slept much more and went to bed early. But the worst of it was his roommate snored. The teacher said he was indignant and angry with his roommate and very dismissive of him, "Who's this lazy guy who's sleeping all the time, and now he's snoring, disturbing my meditation."

But at some point, he stopped his complaining, and he took the snores of his roommate as the subject of his mindfulness meditation. He just became really mindful of it. His resentment, his anger, his self-righteousness, all those faded away as he just got absorbed in the sound, listening. That was a turning point in which he started to understand what mindfulness was and the simplicity of it, and that simplicity of even something that he thought was a horrible distraction and something that was ruining his meditation, actually become the source of really maturing in this understanding what this insight practice is.

These are all stories meant to convey that there are no distractions when we do insight meditation. There's just more things to be aware of, more things to be mindful of, more things to absorb and take in and learn how to be with, with simplicity, with equanimity, with non-resistance, with openness, with "this too is included." There is no thing, no distraction, except maybe the house burning down, something serious like that. But in ordinary situations, the idea is to always fold everything into the practice.

These are important lessons I got from this practice. I'll tell more stories like this, simple stories, I hope, for this week about my practice. Thank you very much.