

No Distractions

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So, when I was first introduced to this practice in Burma, the mindfulness practice, insight practice, I was staying in a small... I found my way. Somehow I had its address for this little monastery on the edges of Bangkok, on the edges of these rice fields, with a swamp. With the top of the swamp, there were planks of wood that you could walk on to the little three steps that went up into a little hut, 10 by 10 maybe, on stilts that I was given to be my meditation spot and my sleeping spot for the time I was there. And it was kind of like a little bit of an anarchistic, small monastery, and wonderful meditation teacher. And a number of things happened during that retreat that I was surprised by, one of the important approaches to practicing mindfulness.

And it was very different than what I'd learned in Zen, where in Zen, kind of, they made pristinely perfect conditions for practice. The meditation hall was always silent. It was very quiet. No one moved. You weren't supposed to move really, but if you had to move, you had to kind of carefully bow first and then adjust your legs and bow over, like a whole production.

But you weren't, you kind of weren't supposed to move. So it'd be really silent and still and you could never come in late. If you weren't there exactly at the right time, the doors were closed and so no one would come in. And so it was the opposite. In Thailand, it was anarchy. And I was mostly left alone in my little hut if I stayed there, but went around the monastery, went to the meals, and all this activity and stuff, and it wasn't silent.

And I didn't quite understand. I just did my best with it. Until one day, during the retreat, there was some reason I had to go into Bangkok, to a very big kind of monastery there. It was kind of the headquarters for one of the big monastic sects. There's two major monastic orders in Thailand, and this was the largest one.

They have a large kind of complex in downtown Bangkok that maybe is more like a university with dormitories for all the monks and multi-story kind of building. And they were going to visit a monk there. It was up some floors. And so you come into this very big building with all these monks and all these people coming and going, and there was a big lobby. And in the lobby, there was a big wood table desk.

And on the desk, there were all these phones. And behind the phone was a monk who was the receptionist, who would be, people would come in, he would greet people, he would tell them where to go, and he would make phone calls, so-and-so is coming, this and that. And there's a lot of people coming and going, it was a noisy place. It was kind of like right off the streets of Bangkok, and people were, you know, it wasn't like going into a monastery, it wasn't like going into a meditation hall, it was like going into the lobby to the train station or something. It was pretty noisy. Yeah.

And there was, if you walk through the lobby, on the other end from the door, there were stairs going up, stairs, upstairs. So a lot of people were going in there, talking, speaking loudly, yelling down from the stairs, down to the receptionist, and he yelling back. But the stairs went up, and underneath the stairs was this area that was maybe, maybe it was like a quarter of the size of this room here. And there were about 20 people there sitting very still doing mindfulness meditation. And around them there was all this chaos, all this noise, all this activity, and they were just sitting quietly.

And what I was told was their practice was to include everything as part of their practice. That there are no distractions in *vipassanā* practice. There's just something else to know. And so yelling, telephone calls, all these people coming and going, pounding up the steps and all that, it just became, was part of their practice. To be included, not to be judged, not to say no, this too is included.

And the next big lesson like this for me that had to kind of follow up for this was at some point I was back here in the United States. And there was a lot of lessons along the way then practicing in Thailand and in all kinds of ways in which things that you, in Zen we thought never would happen. I remember once it was the hot season in Thailand. I was out in the plains of eastern Thailand. It was really hot in the monastery.

And there again, I was given a little cabin hut, practice alone. It was so hot that I would get up my meditation and there would be an outline of sweat on the floor from where I'd been sitting. It was just really hot. And my cabin was right up against the little fence that was the back of the monastery where there was a big farmer's field. And one day I heard this rumble of an engine going, like a tractor thing or something.

And it was rumbling and making noise. And the noise got louder and louder and louder in the course of the day. Maybe it was a few days. And I didn't know what it was. And at some point, the floor, the little cabin, started to shake.

And what it was, there was someone who was out there with a backhoe, about three feet from my back wall in the farmer's field, digging a trench. And so not only was it hot and I was sweating, I was also, the floor was going down. And the idea was, that's practice too. I wasn't supposed to leave and find a better place to practice. The idea was you include everything as practice.

So I did the best I could. But then the kind of representative time when it worked kind of well for me, this way of including everything, and maybe I've told a story here recently, is I was practicing at IMS, the retreat center in Massachusetts, for a three-month retreat. That's a long time. And there was a person who sat next to me for those three months. And we were kind of right in the front, almost like maybe the front row somehow.

And at the front of the meditation hall, there were two doors coming in from the main area of the building. And so there was a, and the other side of that wall was a walking meditation hall like we have here, a wooden floor. So this, my partner sitting next to me, he would always come late into the hall. We'd all settled already. And you could hear him coming because he'd go across that wooden floor like, my mind back then, he was like a lumberjack with his boots on, pounding the floor.

He would come and sit down next to me. And he must have been out for a long run or something, or something. I don't know what he was doing, but he would be his heavy breathing. You know, and so he sat next to me, so he's doing that. And then that would finally calm down.

And I guess by that time he had gotten warm being inside. And then he would, he had, back then they had velcro for the jackets. I haven't seen that for a long time, but he would rip the velcro off. So here I was, you know, three-month retreat, you know, almost many of the sittings, that would be the experience. The first half of the sitting would be, and my attitude was something like, if only this person wasn't doing it, I could get concentrated.

If only if this person wasn't doing it, I could have a good retreat. Why is this person doing this? This is disrespectful. Someone, the authorities there need to fix this problem. I should write a letter.

I should say something. This is wrong. You know, and this is not right. This is like, I'm a Zen student after all. And, you know, this is completely unacceptable.

What's going on here? So I had a long time. I had probably about a month of my reactions, my judgments, my ideas. And mostly I had this idea that the problem was with him. Slowly, slowly, slowly I relaxed until there was no problem.

He didn't change. But I got used to it. I just folded it into the practice. There was pounding of the floor. It was just listening, mindful and listening.

And it was completely okay, no problem, no reaction. Breathing, no problem. And after a while, it kind of receded into the background. And I hardly noticed it anymore. And I saw how much I added.

I added the reactions, the judgments, I added the idea of my practice. I built all these ideas and stories that I added. So there's a teaching in our tradition from Ajahn Chah who said... Sounds don't bother you when you meditate. You're bothering the sounds.

So the idea is, in this practice, is to not really create pristine opportunities. We do a little bit of it. We try to create the nice situation, and well enough, but to just include everything as practice. And some people find that a little hard here at IMC, especially if they come in from a Zen background, because people come in late. And some people are not so quiet when they come in late.

And then they come and walk by you on the floor. Maybe they bump into your toes or something, or they sit down next to you and they're next to you, and they kind of have the velcro thing or the equivalent. And so the idea in our practice, there are no distractions. It's just one more thing to practice with. And to learn about yourself and to learn how you react and judge and resist and have a whole drama that you're creating, and to really understand what you're contributing to it until the day comes when you leave it alone.

And there are people who come to IMC who have reactions when they first come here and all the busyness and the noise and coming late. And if they decide to come back, then at some point people have much more ease and they're free and they're to relax around. It's okay. Okay. I have the practice to hold it.

I have the spacious mind that can hold that too. I don't get riled up by it. I don't get concerned with it. It's not an easy process to come to that place. There's all kinds of inner issues that are very active for people around noise and people coming and coming, you know, unbidden.

And people have had a lot of harm done to them, a lot of surprises that were painful. And so by association, it could be difficult to have all these things happen here. So it's hard, but it's a wonderful work. It's really important work to practice with everything. Practice everything that you have that comes up, to practice with the reactions, whether it's mild or big or deep.

And that's what hopefully the instructions, the teachings here will support us, so that we learn to practice with everything that life has to give us. And in that regard, I hope that what we have here at IMC, Wednesday morning, is pristine, perfect conditions for practice that look very different than other places you can go. And what makes it pristinely perfect is how imperfect it is. And we can practice with this as well. So I hope that makes sense and... You appreciate that and understand a little bit.

And also part of this also is that we want to make IMC available to people in a complicated urban life where people have a lot of responsibilities, work and family and all kinds of things. And so we want to make it easy for people to come and go here. And so people are welcome to come late, they're welcome to leave early. There's a kind of ease, hopefully, of coming and going here that works for people's complicated urban schedules so that we can provide support for people in a wide kind of way. So that's also part of the ethos of how we hold IMC.

So hopefully that makes sense, and hopefully you appreciate that, and maybe you also contribute to pristine, perfect conditions to your practice, none of which was a distraction. None of it is a problem. It's just one more thing to practice with. So, thank you.