

Stories of Practice (4 of 5) Growing Appreciation

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So hello and good morning on this Thanksgiving day in the United States. It's kind of remarkable to have a whole day that's dedicated to Thanksgiving, giving thanks.

It's been one of the surprises for me, in my years of Buddhist practice: how much deep gratitude, how much deep appreciation this practice has evoked in me; a surprise to me, all the different ways that gratitude, appreciation come along, arises, sometimes for the people who have supported me, knowingly and unknowingly inspired me in my practice, along the path of practice, inspired me with their goodness.

Sometimes it's been a deep appreciation for life itself, a gratitude for life, to be part of these amazing life systems of this planet, which I can appreciate and feel tremendous grace of gratitude for. Maybe because, you know, I don't understand it fully. I don't try to understand it.

Maybe there's a deeper way of living that is deeper than understanding: a deep, deep kind of simplicity of being that is free of the challenges and the viewpoints that come from how we think. Certainly I love thinking. Thinking is my friend. I have a very friendly relationship to thinking. It's also great to experience life free of thinking.

One of the things that I look back at in my practice is – all the time that I sat in my early years in a Zen meditation hall, it's called the zendo – in retrospect, they tended to be very simple, empty rooms. Sometimes they had altars and Buddhist statues, but they were relatively simple. They had no – thinking back, except for maybe flowers on the altar – there was no life there. There were no flowers or trees. They tended not to have windows, so you couldn't look at the natural world outside.

The way we would meditate would be sitting facing a wall that was sometimes only a foot or two from where my knees were, sometimes further back, maybe a yard, and we would meditate with our eyes open. There wasn't really anything interesting to look at. Sometimes the floor, sometimes the wall, but it wasn't anything in particular.

What became clear, what stood out in highlight – they never talked about this, but kind of sensory deprivation (I never felt like I was being deprived) – was that the hours of sitting there, the life that stood out, the life that was alive and living, was the life that was in me at that present moment. At some point, rather than living in my thoughts, I began living in the lived life of the present. That was where life was. That's where the wonder of the natural world was appearing and being.

In a certain way, what existed as a life in that moment was only what was happening as I breathed, as I sat in this body, as I thought, and as I had emotions. These things began to appear in kind of a highlight where it became clear that I should care for it. It became clear that there were choices of using my thoughts in ways that diminished the quality of my life, or in thinking of ways that did not diminish it, that allowed it to be.

It never occurred to me to try to improve the quality of my inner life. It just occurred to me not to harm it, not to diminish it, and to sit there with that simple dedication, not making it worse.

I came to delight in the simplicity of being, just being here, being alive. So much started to disappear in my thinking, my judgments, my stories, all these kinds of preoccupations that diminished me, that limited me.

The marvel of this thing that happened was that there rose this wonderful sense of appreciation. We would always end our meditations with bowing. For me, it was a bow of appreciation. And after a while, it was difficult not to do it; I felt something was really wrong, because I wanted to have some way to express that appreciation.

Living in monasteries, we had to bow to each other a lot, as we passed each other in pathways. And this wonderful bow, even when I didn't want to do it, there was something that changed in my heart. It touched that place of appreciation. It touched that place of some gratitude.

To go through the day, you know, I once counted how many times I had to bow before ten o'clock in the morning, just in the rituals we all did. And I think I got up to fifty bows. But then, you know, that's just the beginning of the day. There was something marvelous about just dipping my head slightly, coming forward, putting my hands together, and bowing.

Something opened inside of my heart every time, little drops, little kind of openings, so much so that when after three years in the monastery I left and I went to Berkeley, California, the next day I was walking down a street there called—some of you know—College Avenue. There were a lot of people where the stores are, there at Ashby and College. All these people were passing by, strangers, and I just wanted to bow to them because that's what we did in the monastery when we passed each other.

I couldn't do it, because they'd probably think I was weird. Then I saw across the street, down the street, someone I'd met at the monastery. I ran after her. Partly it was nice to say hello to her. But partly I ran after her because I just really wanted to bow to someone. It's just like I had to appreciate, or be grateful, or have this kind of sentiment in my heart step forward.

So this simplicity of being, of just being intimately connected to the living life here, in the stark environment of the zendo, it was almost like I didn't have to meditate. It was just like meditation, maybe it was a distraction—formal meditation, doing something—from just being in touch with the lived life as it was happening in the present moment and settling into it.

What that also did, it began to then awaken in me a greater appreciation and gratitude for the other people in my life. When I saw people expressing compassion to others, to myself, how they lived their life, that simplicity of being, I just felt such gratitude, such delight in them, and it informed me.

I saw people who had a simplicity of being. There just was no complications, no big social games, no greed, hate, and delusion. It touched something really deep inside of me that I recognized and just loved and appreciated, some kind of purity. I saw acts of generosity and it would just move me to a great degree, how generous people were in even simple ways, like just being able to offer, you know, thanks to the generosity of offering thanks.

I'll give you one example, and then we have to stop. At the Zen Center, there was a gathering of the primary Zen masters who lived in the United States. Back then there weren't that many, maybe seven, eight of them who came. Most of them were Japanese, some American. They were having just a meeting among themselves; they had business to take care of, and it was nice to meet and just hang out with each other.

One evening they had a panel, to be able to answer questions from the Zen students there, so they were sitting at this table all in a row, answering questions. Then some of the students at the Zen Center came around to offer them some water or tea to drink. They would come and put a glass in front of them, come gently, quietly from behind so not to disturb them, and put something there.

I think most of the Zen masters were kind of involved in the conversation and the question and answer, and didn't notice or didn't really register what was being given to them.

But we came to the last one in the row, and someone came around and put the water or something in front of him. Maybe he stood out because the other ones hadn't done this. He turned around and bowed and said, "Thank you," to the person who had given him just the water right then.

I said, "Wow, even that simplicity of someone doing such a simple thing and taking the time to really thank them." That inspired me. That was a change moment for me, to see that.

The point that I would try to convey is that as I was sitting and discovering the tremendous value of this simplicity of being, it made me more sensitive, more aware of the goodness around me, and to be in an environment where there was a lot of goodness, not just in the Buddhist community, but I started seeing it in town and people who were not Buddhists. "Wow, this is cool."

That's been one of the great delights of this Buddhist life, the delight of becoming increasingly sensitive, increasingly appreciative of how much goodness there is in this world. a world where it's very easy to be overwhelmed by how much what's terrible is happening. I would venture to guess that for every major thing that's terrible, there's much, much more goodness that's going on.

May we all contribute to that goodness.

Thank you.