

Simplicity

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So good morning, everyone, and welcome to IMC.

So I'm not exactly sure what to say this morning, not for a lack of words, but I'm thinking about how simple this practice is. And I'm also thinking about, let alone with the history of my practice today, because I'm going to go soon to teach a two-week retreat at the Green Gulch Zen Center, where I began my training and became a priest many years ago. And I am considered a Zen teacher, though it's very rare that I do that. But they've invited me to come and do a two-week retreat there, starting on Saturday. And so maybe it's natural enough that I'm a little bit reviewing my practice, some of it's 50 years ago, in Zen, and it was very important for me. So these two things are kind of swimming in my heart.

So I want to start by saying that I treasure this practice for its simplicity. There was a teacher, a *Vipassanā* teacher, I spent a little bit of time with, an Indian named Manindraji, and he had a saying where he said, if it's not simple, it's not *Vipassanā*. Right. It's almost like the question is, how simple can you be? I did have some problems in India when I was there, and I went and told him about the problems, and he said, Gil. It's important to be simple, but not a simpleton.

And so there are three words that I like to use in my practice, and just single words, to kind of drop them in, and they help me a lot, just to keep with the simplicity of the practice. And the first, the one I use the most, is the word here. And I say the word, mostly I use it when my mind is very busy and I can't get it focused and get it present here. So I just say the word here, and I use it as a, so H-E-R-E, and I use it as a reminder where I am. And I'm here. But it's not just a reminder, it's also almost like a question mark after the word.

Here, and then what is here? What is this? And I just open my awareness to just take in the experience of the moment, whatever way it wants to come. And because I often use it when

my mind is very busy, spinning thoughts, here, oh, this is what it's like to have a spinning mind. The word here doesn't judge, it doesn't try to make it different. It's just like curious, here, what is here?

So it's trying to be very simple, kind of wake up here with this. And so the simplicity of this practice of just being here, and then in the process of that, discovering how little you're here, really here. The thinking mind, some people live in their thoughts and live in their concerns. And those thoughts and concerns might have very little to do with here, this place and time. It might have to do with the future. It might have to do with a past.

It might have to do with fantasy. And the mind constructs a past, constructs a future, constructs fantasies. And we sometimes, almost like we live in it, we inhabit it, that becomes a center. And that's often with ourselves, the focus can be very much with self-concern. And so it's kind of like we're reacting and considering, what's it for me? What's the effect on me?

Who am I in this relationship? In this kind of situation? What am I going to get? Or this is dangerous for me? I'm afraid. I'm anxious.

And I, I, I, I, with a lot of these thoughts that are about past, present, fantasies, anything but here. And so to sit and say, here, and discover that. Well, I am hardly here. In fact, I think here is pretty boring. This is, what good is a here going to do for me? I mean, I have important things to do, you know, an important place to go and be, and, you know, I'm better off planning for those and preparing for them and thinking about them because certainly that will make a better future.

Or maybe it's even, you're more concerned about making a better past. But just think about it enough. And it can be very alluring, this world of there. And, you know, it can be very promising. Or it can be filled with danger. And it can be kind of self-fulfilling in many ways.

One way is that you finally get there. But you don't stay there. Right? You're already thinking about the next there, which is dangerous, or which is where you're going to, you know, where you're anxious or where you want something. And so you're hardly there for that. What does it take to be here?

Really here. And what is here? What's the, I think it's a, I kind of love this English word here, because it's both vague and specific. I could say, I'm here on my seat at IMC, very particular. Someone could be preoccupied in their thoughts. They hardly even listen to you, and their eyes are glazed.

And you ask them, are you here? Where are you? You look at them, where are you? But you can say very specifically, I'm here, sitting here. I'm here in this room. I'm here at IMC.

What is IMC? I'm here in Redwood City. I'm here in California. I'm here in this world. The word here can have a lot of locations, but if you say the word here, and the answer is limited to what's within your direct experience, then I'm here with all of you. What's that like?

I'm here with myself. I'm sitting here. What's this like? Here. And so just to say here. And if you find out that you're not here, and you have a lot of good reasons not to be here, get a second opinion.

And maybe when this talk is finished, you'll appreciate the value of being here. It's really good. And there's also now. So sometimes that's the second word I like to use, now. Sometimes my mind is in the future, in the past. Now.

What's now? And that's another question that's interesting. Now. What's the now? For me, that puts it in time. And now is not just that fast.

What is now? Now at IMC, we're having a *Dharma* talk or a sitting. So it's kind of like has a little bit of time in it. What was, we sat before, I'm talking now, next thing will happen. And there's a kind of a flow, a kind of like a, the two are connected, all these three, past, present, and future are kind of connected. And they kind of need to be if anybody who speaks a sentence, the past, present, and future are right there in the sentence.

They can't be. If you're really in the present, and all you're aware of is a single word, a single syllable, without any concern of previous syllables, previous words, and the future ones, you won't understand what people are saying. There's now includes the past and the present in a certain way. William James, the psychologist, philosopher, apparently had a saying, the saddleback of the present. If you made a graph of it, it kind of looks like a saddleback, kind of an upside-down graph curve, and with the valley. And the real present is just exactly at the midpoint of this curve that comes down.

But it's connected to the rest of it. So what is the now? What kind of now are you living in? So those are two words I use. And I'll give you the next word later. It's going to keep you suspenseful.

So when I started, you know, I first was introduced to Zen now over 20, 50 years ago, and I took to it pretty quickly, but I didn't really start it up for some years. And that took me maybe two, three years before I really started a regular practice. And so I started my regular practice when I went back to college. I dropped out, and I had two more years of college to finish. And so I'd been traveling and being around. So I came back, found a place to live, and I started meditating twice a day, 40 minutes in the morning and 40 minutes in the evening before going to sleep, except Sunday.

And the reason for that, I'd have been introduced to Zen meditation at the San Francisco Zen Center, and it was, that's what they did there. So I thought, well, that's what you do. They never meditated on Sunday. It was a day off for everyone there. So I thought, that's what you do. So, but I had a reason to start meditating.

And the reason was that I was suffering. I had a certain social suffering that I had, and it bothered me and concerned me. And I had some intuition, some idea that the Zen meditation would help with it. So that's what motivated me. And for a 20-year-old college student to be meditating twice a day like that is a little bit unusual. And so that's what I did.

And so after a while, some time passed doing that, I also went to, there was a small Zen sitting group that met Tuesdays and Thursday evenings in the campus community. And I would go join them and sit with them. And usually there was three or four of us doing it in a small little bedroom. And so that was kind of a big part of my life, this. And after a while, the suffering that I had wanted to address dissolved, kind of disappeared. I never saw it disappear.

I never, it was never like some aha moment or nothing really happened that I recognized, but somehow it kind of vanished. And maybe we can attribute it to doing the meditation practice. I'm a rational, logical kind of person sometimes, and I like to do things for a reason. Right. And what was strange was I continued this two meditations a day, but I no longer had a reason. The reason was to overcome my suffering, but I no longer had a reason.

And so why am I doing this? And I go, why am I doing this? I kept, you know, I felt somehow I did it. I wouldn't use the word compelled for it, but I just did it. Like something in me just did it. I can't say anything more than that.

Why am I doing it? And so that went on for some time until finally an answer occurred to me. The answer was, I'm meditating to express myself like an artist expresses themselves with paint, with dance, with song. You don't dance as quickly as you can to get the dance finished with. That's not the point of a dance or a song. Part of it is to express yourself, to inhabit the event you're doing.

And so for me, this was my art. This was my way of just expressing something inside. I didn't think about it so much, but I was satisfied with that answer. And in fact, what was, in retrospect, I mean, the language I tried to understand, what happened eventually, was at the time I used, I had the word integrity, that what I was tapping into when I sat and meditated was a sense of integrity. I don't think it was the idea of ethical integrity that I, I mean, integrity was a big word for me, so I'm not sure what I meant. But looking back at it now, I think what I meant more likely was integral in becoming one.

There was a feeling of becoming whole. Somehow sitting there, I let go of the past and the future. I let go of there and then. And I started to kind of come to a rest in this body, in this heart, in this situation, just here in a very simple way. I was very lucky, I feel, because I knew very little about meditation. The only thing I knew was I was supposed to sit there and be present for what is.

I didn't think I was supposed to stop my thinking or do anything, change anything, just sit there and not move and just be present for there. And sometimes I had the idea that I was supposed to practice unconditional acceptance of this moment as it is. And so if I was suffering or if I was thinking a lot, well, that's what I had to accept. But this practice of acceptance meant that I was no longer actively participating, actively staying involved with the thoughts, the concerns, everything. And something started to kind of settle and settle. And I found this sense of being at home here in my body, especially in my chest area.

I felt kind of this warm buzz, warmth, vibration, somehow in my chest, I was really, felt delicious, really nice. And then it occurred to me one day, why do I have this, what I called then integrity? Why do I only have this when I'm meditating? The mind in meditation and the mind outside of meditation is the same mind. There's an arbitrary line between meditation and daily life. Why don't I have this feeling all the time?

Why don't I be this way all the time? And that became my question. And that became the motivation, one of the motivations then when I finished college to go and practice at the San Francisco Zen Center. I thought if I go there and practice more, that somehow I'll discover how to make this transition of this goodness I felt in meditation could then become in my daily life. And in fact, that's what happened. And what grew over time with doing more meditation was I didn't, I don't feel like I attained anything.

Sometimes I got concentrated and that was nice. But what happened was this sense of expression from the inside out became stronger. And it was this sense of there was something alive, something flowing in me, something activated in me that felt like a profoundly at home, profoundly whole, profoundly meaningful, profoundly good. And it didn't feel like me. It wasn't the me, myself, and I that I was when I had my social anxieties and social difficulties and who I was in relation to other people. It wasn't the I that lived in my thoughts about myself and the judgments about myself and the projections and the fears and the fantasies about me, myself and mine.

It was actually, all that, I might still be doing it, but that started to feel irrelevant. That didn't seem interesting, but what was kind of flowing alive for me, the sense of aliveness inside, I couldn't exactly appropriate it as this is myself, because it was not coming or being this place

where the mind constructs a self, idea of self, me, myself, and mine. And it just, so I became less interested in this I thing, not because some idea that there's no self, because the primary I that I lived in was the constructed one, the one that gets coalesced through a lot of thoughts and feelings and kind of a focus at it, with it, being it. And if you think you are your thoughts, then the thoughts are going to be all over the place, thinking about it, planning, figuring it out, reacting, having better conversations. Because that's where we're working everything out. But if you're not working out who you are in your thoughts, who are you?

So when I say the word here, it's not, there's something else here besides my thoughts. Something else here besides my concerns and my wishes and my fears. There's something else here that is not me, but is not apart from me. And this is a place that I found is really invaluable. This is a welling up inside that sometimes is related to love, sometimes related to sense of ease and to peace, sometimes it's related to understanding and wisdom. There's an understanding that comes with that.

And with time, I found that it was something that was very responsive to the world. And so I was living in the monastery, practicing somewhat intensely monastic life. And I started to feel kind of strange, and it may be in a good way, because I found myself that this expressivity that I was finding inside was now responding to the world for me. And so one day I passed the abbot on the paths, and I kind of just went up to him spontaneously and made a strange statement. Let me explain the statement after I say it to you, because you'll think it's odd. I told him, I think I'm becoming a response machine.

And what I meant by that, the machine was just to kind of, it wasn't that I thought I was becoming a robot. I was very much alive and not a robot. But it was just a way of trying to say to him, in the language of the time that I had, that something inside of me was operating that wasn't my usual kind of self and the control tower, that was now responding to what happened around me. Especially if there was suffering, there was a response of compassion, of care. And something is welling up, something is responding to the world. And that became where it felt the right source for living the life that I have.

And that became a surprise for me, is how much decision about how to live, where to live from, came from this inner expression, this inner vitality, this inner flow or inner something that was kind of flowing up. And so partly I then, I decided at some point to base my life on that. And the words that I used for that was a life of compassion. I wanted to live a life that responded, this response machine, I wanted to respond to the suffering of the world in some way or other. Nothing else made any sense to me. Nothing else but coming from this place made sense.

So the third word that I like, sorry, I like the word here. Just saying it simply to be simple, just here. But now you've maybe learned, for me at least, here, it also taps into something very meaningful for me that feels very profound within, here. Of course, it's not always here, not always available, but here. And then, but it makes a here not so boring. It feels rich.

It feels like it's alive. The second is the now, to really, this is the only place this expressivity, this aliveness can be. Just like, you know, someone says, I just love to dance. Dance is the purpose of my life. And I'm really planning to dance. Thirty years later, I'm planning to dance.

It's really important. Well, that's nice that you're doing planning so much, but what about the dancing? The dancing is only now. That's where the dancing is. And so the third word that I like is the word yes. And sometimes when I sit, I just say the word yes to myself.

And I just love this word because it's an appreciation of this expressivity. I'm sitting here, not doing anything, being very simple, and there's something good here, something healthy that flows and moves. In our tradition here at IMC, the Theravāda tradition, it would be called wholesome. It also, and then I saw over time that in this tradition here, *Vipassanā* tradition, one of the things that speaks to this possibility, this deeper wellspring inside, is that number of things that speak to it. But one of them is something called sensations that we have in the body, sensations and feelings, that are not there because our ordinary senses are stimulated. It's not because the world is stimulating our senses.

We're tasting good food or smelling good smells, seeing good sights, having a nice tactile experience. But rather, there's no worldly reason for these deeper feelings. They simply arise from the quality and the characteristic of this deeper life that we have. And as we settle slowly, I learned, it's good to pay attention to it, to allow it to be there. This deeper sensing, deeper sensations that are, if you're only navigating the world in the surface of things, you're not going to learn this deeper wellspring that's possible. And in this Buddhist tradition we're in, they kind of treat discursive thinking, conversational thinking, a lot of planning thinking, a lot of remembering thinking, where they're usually connected to stories, ideas that are complicated.

They kind of refer to it as surface thinking. And there is profound thinking. So this deeper place that I'm calling my expressivity, that is capable of thinking, a very different quality of thinking than the neurotic thinking mind. It's a source of deep emotions. It's a source of deep feelings. And one of the metaphors that this tradition uses for this kind of deep feelings is a lake, very quiet, still lake, that's not being fed by any water from the outside.

There's no streams running into it. There's no rain coming from the outside to it. So there's nothing that's coming from the outside, except from deep within at the center of the lake. There's a natural spring where fresh mountain water is coming into the lake and flowing through it. So there's sense of movement there. Water is water, but there's two kinds of water here.

There's the water that's still, and the vital freshwater coming in is flowing through like an underwater spring of water, and, you know, flowing outwards, up and out, up and out from that spring. That's the metaphor for this profound place within. So to say yes, we have something to say yes to, and then see what happens. And when I say yes to this, there's no other place I want to be than here. No other place I want to be but now, because that deeper place is all about here and now.

Does it make me poorer to be here and now with this? I would say it's the opposite. It makes me richer. Right. The kind of richness and wealth that Buddhism points to, which is not found in the bank. It's found in your heart, within you.

This is what the most valuable things we have in our life, is the love, the care, the presence, the vitality rises from deep within. So I don't know if this speaks to any of you, if you recognize any of this, or if this is meaningful for you to hear. But for me, this is something I learned from, or during, while I was doing Zen practice. And since I discovered it and allowed it to be, it just keeps growing and growing in my life. My practice is a lot about allowing this to really, to trust this more and more and more. And so it becomes a life of constant emergence.

They constantly, something's being born here that I don't know what it is. So, for example, when I started this talk, I wasn't quite sure. I had some idea of what I was going to talk about, but I didn't know what. But I trust that if I kind of stay in touch with this place, the words will come. Some kind of words will come. And I also said this, talked about this yesterday, so.

So, you know, a little bit repeating myself, which makes it a little bit easier for it to come again maybe. It's kind of fresh. So, some of us live at times on the surface of things, the surface of our life. And sometimes we can live in the depth of our lives. And this practice of *vipassanā* is meant to be very simple, because that's the door for this deeper life to surface. And this deeper life that surfaces then is a life of responsivity.

It's a life that can't be separated from the world. It's because we kind of turn ourselves inside out, in a sense. We're much more sensitive, but sensitive from this place of feeling at home or at ease with care and love. And so we respond to the world. And why do we respond? Why should we respond?

Those are the wrong questions, because it doesn't have to have a reason. Maybe there is no reason, except that this is what this heart wants to do, wants to arise. Why did I keep sitting when I was a student in college, meditate? Why, why, why, why? I offered you some reasons that I came to. But this place that motivated me to meditate didn't have to have a reason.

It, in a sense, wasn't a reason. To have a reason may be useful, but maybe sometimes it's not necessary. If a neighbor is sick, do you have to have a reason to bring them food? And you could have a reason. Yeah, my neighbor is sick. That's all the reason I need.

But is it thought out? Or is it just almost like a natural movement of the heart, that you don't have to think about it. You don't have to have a reason. It's just that's what you do. So for me, my life has been, lives more and more from this other place that emerges. And I think it's a delight.

I think it makes it. And part of that for me is that it's very closely associated with a sense of ease. And so yesterday someone asked me, Gil, you seem to be very busy all the time. How do you do that? And I said, well, I don't think of myself as busy. I think of myself fully scheduled.

But why I can do it is, because the schedule filled slowly over many years, but part of why I can do it is that I'm coming from this place of ease. I'm not coming from anxiety or stress or stress. And I've slowly learned about this beautiful place that that's where responding to the world can be. And so sometimes I get, in a way I didn't when I was younger, I get refreshed and be vital, vitalized by what I'm doing. Rather than needing to rest when I finish, I'm just ready to do the next thing, kind of, sometimes.

So I hope it's okay to talk about myself that much, but. But I wanted to somehow give a certain kind of depth to this simplicity of this practice and to these simple words, here, now, and yes. So we have a few minutes, and I think I would like to ask you, you can just sit quietly and meditate with what's just said. You could leave. But what I'd like to ask you to do is if you just turn to a couple of people next to you, and share something about what this has said, what this has, is anything that I said touched you in some way? Here, now, yes, or what I said.

And I use the word touch intentionally because that's a physical thing. So is anything that has touched, and what has been touched? And you're welcome for anything. I trust it all myself. So if you're annoyed by it all, that's completely fine. Okay.

It's actually important to speak it, but whatever it is, but whatever, you don't have to share the, you know, if it's uncomfortable to share. But just say hello to someone, and we'll take

about maybe five, six minutes for that, and then I'll ring the bell and we'll have to have a last few minutes here together. It's okay? So if you, and look around, make sure everyone has a little group to talk to.