

Thursday dharma talk

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So when I was first introduced to what we might call Buddhist meditation, it was at the *Zen Center of San Francisco*, and the way it was taught to me was to have breathing at the center of the practice. And in fact, I was taught to count my breathing one to ten. But the context for doing the practice, the way it was taught or conveyed to me, it was not a technique. It was a means to come home to oneself, be at home here now. And I came to see how much I wasn't at home here now, how much I was thinking a lot about everywhere but here, or if I was thinking about here it wasn't very interesting or useful.

And so there wasn't so much to attain something, but to be something. It wasn't so much to huff and puff and use counting breath, which was added back then as a way of getting something like getting concentrated, but it was a way of leaving myself radically alone, to just be with the moment as it presented itself. And so kind of I realized maybe after doing it some time that the orientation I had was that the language I used for myself was to practice unconditional acceptance of the present moment. And I didn't know much about meditation. I didn't know much about what could happen. And I was very lucky that I didn't know so much.

So I wasn't measuring myself or thinking it should be different. I remember my first couple of years where I started practicing every day, and realized in retrospect that I had no idea that I was supposed to stop thinking. So I, you know, the thinking was somehow wrong. And so I, in a certain way, kept thinking. But what's only begun happening was that I would think, but I wouldn't be the thinker that I would think, in some ways stepping back from it, just accepting thinking, which is radically different than being in the thinking and participating in the thinking and thinking even better, thinking better things. It was just kind of like leaving it alone.

And this leaving things alone is unconditional. Just leaving things alone as they appeared in the present moment. I was so supported by this counting the breath, being with the breath. I didn't think that I was supposed to get good at counting the breath or good at concentrating on the breath. It was just helping me not get caught up in all the things that took me away from being at home here. It was like a little reminder, stay here, stay here with this. And in the process, I became quite intimate with my breathing and found it to be really wonderful.

So this way of practicing served me very well. And when I went and practiced in Burma to do this *vipassanā* practice, I could see there and other people when they came back to the United States were tying themselves in knots with a very detailed instruction that we got back there because they took it as a technique to get somewhere, to make something happen, almost as if it wasn't okay just to be alive and be present for what was there here. And so some of them were really spinning out and trying so hard and trying to get concentrated and trying to really penetrate and penetrate through to, you know, some kind of insight. And paradoxically I followed the instructions very carefully that the teacher gave me, but I never saw it as a technique. I saw it as a more and more precise way to be at home, to not add anything extra, not be going off in dusty minds or dusty lands of my mind, you know, just here, and to a kind of way of radically leaving myself alone but in a very kind of precise way.

And that's what I gained from this practice in Burma, was the precision by which I could leave myself alone, or precision I could just be present for something and accept it moment by moment. What I saw that day, and by doing *vipassanā* practice, was that the acceptance practice I did in *Zen*, which served me very well, was kind of broad. It was kind of like, you know, this is not exact analogy that's appropriate but close enough to give you an idea. It's like I could do it, I could accept what was over a minute period of time, sixty seconds. I could generally accept most of what was happening there. But when I started doing *vipassanā*, I saw there were lots of seconds in which I wasn't accepting things. In the micro moments, there was a lot of underground rejection and then striving, little by little kind of subterranean ways in which it was operating.

And so the precision of *vipassanā*, just really being there, helped me to do this kind of coming home more and more fully. And it grew, and with that grew the *Dharma*, that grew the natural kind of ripening of mindfulness rather than mindfulness being something we construct and make happen. I learned that a lot of *Dharma* is remarkable. I mean, I was kind of in awe of the natural maturation, natural unfolding, the natural process, the lawful process almost, of how the heart, the mind, the body kind of unfolds and changes and grows and develops, expands. I had no idea it was possible, so I wasn't chasing it. But just coming home and being here in

this careful way, caring way, gave the conditions for something to begin slowly to ripen.

And so this *Ānāpānasati*, I love this practice of *Ānāpānasati*, because to me it's coming home. It's being home here, and with the breath at the center of it all. And some people have a complicated relationship with their breathing, and certainly I've had that. I've been doing this for over fifty years, so I kind of, uh, I've done probably everything wrong. I have lots of experience of all kinds of ways. But, you know, just more like a homecoming.

And so there's some way of practicing *Ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing, that every breath, every step along the way, is appreciated as this movement to coming home. And not only coming home, but a gathering, gathering all of who you are here. As we go along in this practice, one of the steps, I think is the eleventh step of the sixteen, usually translated in English, that's breathing in when concentrates, breathing out when concentrates the mind. But the word, I know for years I thought because I only read the English, I thought the word was *samādhi*. But it's not. You don't have to remember, but it's in *Pāli*, *samādahaṃ*. And it means together. It means to bring together.

And so breathing in, we're gathering the mind. Breathing out, we're gathering the mind. And how I understand that is gathering all of ourselves into one whole. There's a way that coming home to ourselves, becoming whole, kind of filling out so that all of who we are has a place here. The good, the bad, and the ugly, it's all there. There's a way in which all of it is allowed to be here. And this breathing can be a support for that.

Especially if you learn how to be with the breathing in a simple, very simple way, not as striving, not as a technique. It may be better not to do it as something to master. Maybe that's more complicated than it needs to be. But every breath is an invitation to not get stuck on something else, not get preoccupied, not be judging. And so, for example, with thinking, I learned that I think a lot. And I was like, wow. There are times I thought I can probably power the California energy grid if they just plugged it into my brain.

But I learned to recognize that. And I learned that it was useful for me to, every exhale, release my thoughts. Every exhale, to stop thinking. Every exhale, to quiet the mind. Every exhale, to relax the thinking muscle, the tension, the pushing, the striving, the contraction there was around thinking. And you know, when you do it every exhale, it's kind of like if the drain in the bathtub is plugged, and there's a little drop that goes in, eventually it'll fill the bathtub. It might take a long time. But every time to let go of thoughts, you know, is accumulative over time. Something changes.

And one of the things that changes is that as we let go, as we don't feed it, as we don't partic-

ipate, we don't believe them, we don't get pulled around by them, we stop being committed to them. We stop, you know, trying to solve our life with them. We stop entertaining ourselves with them. This strong push, this strong drive, this strong magnetism or gravitational pull into thoughts begins to weaken. And one of the remarkable things is that thinking gets lighter and more transparent. It becomes, sometimes my thoughts have been really heavy in some profound way, just really like weighing me down, you know, solid, serious. Sometimes my thoughts are more real than reality, like this is the big thing and I'm really locked in.

But that's a lot of the reason for that, because I'm so fascinated, so interested, so horrified, so reactive, so all these complicated ways in which we live with our thinking. And so slowly letting go or relaxing around it, and settling in, the way that I kept feeling my thoughts diminished, and thoughts became lighter and lighter and softer, transparent, they say, like a cloud, small cloud in an endless sky just floating by. Clouds and thoughts have no weight. But again it wasn't because I was trying to make that happen, because that wasn't the name of the game. The name of the game was, can I just be here with this in a simple way, allow this to be?

And of course sometimes my answer was no, not because I have important things to do. I have to get, you know, there's a long path to follow here in *Dharma*, and, you know, I certainly need to get enlightened before the next person. You know, all kinds of things I got caught in. But I could see, or I could see the tension of that. I could see how that was actually dividing me. That was keeping me from being home. And so I just thought, oh, so this what? What is it to be home here? Or what is it to be whole here? What is it to include all of it in an open, spacious awareness here now?

And so this *Ānāpānasati* begins with this very simple idea of sitting down, being erect, and letting there be awareness here, establishing awareness here as we breathe in, as we breathe out. To breathe with awareness, to breathe in awareness, to breathe for awareness. To be aware of breathing, to be aware in breathing. And just that's enough. Everything else kind of follows if you do this thoroughly. Just say it's that simple over and over and over again.

And then there's getting to know it better. We have our natural capacities to know, so if you hang out with your breathing you'll get to know it. And there's something about getting to know something, that kind of as we get intimate or connected, that actually is very satisfying for our system. There's something about being a friend, being connected, being clear, knowing, that the mind wants to do. But not if I'm straining, not if I'm trying to accomplish something, not if I'm thinking that there's something important to understand. What is it, and I don't know, everyone else knows but I don't know, what is it about this breathing? It's

just very simple to know it.

So it begins at step one, that's the beginning instructions, and then there's sixteen set of instructions. And I like to think that even long-experienced practitioners spend most of their time on step one. That means that I'm always a beginner. Yes, always be a beginner. There are two kinds of beginners. There are the people who are really just beginning for the first time. And then there's people who are experienced beginners.

So if you have a little bit of conceit, then it would be special. Consider yourself an experienced beginner. And what does that mean? It means you're quite content being a beginner. You're happy to be starting over again and starting at the beginning and just okay, I'm so lucky to be able to sit down and do this now here. And so there is a natural process that unfolds, and so some of the ways of understanding the instructions is not as instructions of what to do, but what to be sensitive to as it occurs, to recognize. The instructions are more a description rather than something to do.

And so you might at some point notice that you're becoming more aware of your body, and so we breathe with the body, we breathe in the body, the whole body begins breathing, and again doesn't have to be a technique. But also because the call, the call of the heart, is to be whole, to be complete. It's nice to kind of know that we can kind of start opening up to include our whole body as we breathe, each person in their own way. Then find out what it means for you. Don't find out what it means for me. And then, oh, what does this mean for me? How do I do this? What's available? What's easy for me to feel the body as I'm breathing? And what's it like to be with the whole body as I breathe?

And then seeing the tensions in the body, and tensions mean that we're holding ourselves away from the whole. We've contracted away or we're divided or we're pushing away. As our lungs were tense, we're not whole. We can't really hold it all together. Everything that's a nature of tension is to divide us. And some people live very divided lives. And so slowly that tension begins to dissolve, let's relax.

And probably some of you can appreciate that. How much has gotten quieter, softer for you? Just the fact that you're here at the retreat for these days, it's something. You might be more, in spite of yourself, you're more relaxed because you're not busy and doing everything and working, and just something begins, the whole system comes into some kind of equilibrium, it settles. Another way of saying coming home to oneself is to come into harmony, come into equilibrium. You know, the whole psychophysical ecosystem kind of comes into balance again when we do this practice. And now to relax.

And then there's a pleasure at some point. I hope at some point. And there are some enjoyments, some appreciation of the goodness of just being here in this simple way. And it's good to be nourished by that. That's one of the teachings of the Buddha too, is being nourished by the goodness. Be nourished by what feels good. Let it feed you.

And then, as Paul said, at some point you notice the tensions of the mind, tensions of thinking. And those can be relaxed because those are also keeping us not home. There's an invitation deep in, I think there's a deep invitation inside if you really get sensitive. There's a kind of natural invitation. Come here. Be here. Relax. Let go.

Don't let go because you should. Let go because it's more satisfactory to be here. It's less satisfactory to be tense, less satisfactory to be divided and scattered. Come back, come back, it's gathering together. So the mental tensions, to relax those. And some of that is again beginning to not begin to relax them. The whole drive to think, that it's probably fair, that a fair number of, to say that a good number of humans, maybe one or two of you, are addicted to your thoughts. And, you know, we should have thinking anonymous classes. Maybe that's what we are.

And so a very important part of mindfulness is to learn how to have an attention awareness that's inclusive of thoughts, that doesn't continue them, doesn't feed them, but it helps you become wise to them, helps you hold them in a wise way. And one of those wise ways to hold them is to see them as just a thought, it's just thinking. Most of you are old enough to realize that you've had a lot of thoughts. You know, don't even try to calculate, but you've had a lot, a lot, a lot of thoughts. Most of them you don't remember. But in a moment, they seem so important. In a moment, we're pulled around by their marketing. Next day, we don't remember. Next year, most of us have done a lot of thinking.

And I think this is my guess, is that for most of you, for most of us, if you ran a statistical analysis, if you asked AI to analyze your thinking, it would come back and say, the returns have been poor. Like for me, you know, I used to have a lot of anxiety, and anxiety about the future or going someplace and being with people or doing some activity or something. And so I would spend a lot of time planning, thinking of what's gonna happen, planning it, worried about what's gonna happen, and I had an idea of what was gonna happen. And then I started noticing that usually whatever the event was didn't happen the way that I thought it was supposed to happen. And in fact my planning and thoughts of what to say, what to do, didn't quite make sense because it never seemed to go on plan. And after a while I realized that my predictive abilities were really poor for the future. And when I saw that enough times, only then did I have the amazing wisdom to say maybe I shouldn't believe this.

Maybe I shouldn't be so enamored or convinced or caught in the grip of these kinds of future planning thoughts, and maybe it's okay to let them go. So we develop wisdom over time that maybe we don't have to give ourselves to them, give ourselves over to them. We don't have to believe them. And there are some people, and I certainly have done this, you know, somehow there's a kind of an automatic pilot kind of assumption that if I think it, it must be true. You know, it must be valid or something. And when the thoughts are self-deprecating, and we see them as true, it's very painful. But who said they're true?

Is every thought true? Is it necessary to hang on to every thought? Is it necessary to believe every thought? Is it necessary to take in the mood, the mood music of every thought? I would say no. And if you think that, then Gil, you don't know what you're talking about, my thoughts are so important, maybe you could just not believe all your thoughts when you're meditating. Maybe there you can kind of like put a question mark after them. Really? Really?

Maybe there you can begin saying, you know, it's okay. Poor mind, you can relax. You've done a good job, you've done a lot of thinking for me. You deserve a break. I'm giving you a break. I'm not going to believe all your thoughts for the next thirty minutes. Relax, relax, let go.

It's possible to understand or see that some of our thinking is fueled by emotions. I saw in myself that a lot of my planning thoughts about the future were fueled by my anxiety, and that's what gave them their power. And so what I learned in mindfulness practice then was to turn my attention to the anxiety that was the push, that was pushing the thoughts, and then learn to breathe with the anxiety, breathe with it, include it in the whole field of breath awareness, breathing room that I'm giving my experience. And in a certain kind of way, welcome the anxiety and remember the idea is to gather everything, to be whole, and not believe that something shouldn't be there. Then we're not whole.

And the odd way of practice is to say, this too can be included. Oh, but this is where I'm a bad person. This too is included. Everything's included. And so, oh, anxiety. Come sit with me. I'll hold you. I'll give you breathing room. You're also part of this whole. You have a place.

And to hold it and be with it and breathe with it is this kind of homecoming, this way of being whole, this way of accepting the present moment as it is rather than being at odds with it or making judgments or criticisms or preferences. Is this too, this too. And that takes the power away from the anxiety. It might still be there, but just like we lean into thoughts, we lean into some of our emotions. We lean in or we pull back, we push away. We have commentary, we have judgments, we have opinions about what the emotions mean. We define ourselves by our emotions.

There's anxiety. Oh, oh, boy, am I an anxious person? Boy, I hope no one noticed. Oh, oh, they're noticing. Those bad people, how could they? It's their fault. And again in this little whole thing, right, as opposed to it's just an anxious thought, just anxiety. I don't have to define myself by it. Just that.

So this movement towards simplification, simplification, just this here. And so in these middle stages of *Ānāpānasati* comes a time where we kind of almost naturally become more sensitive, more attuned to the tensions and overexcitation or the pressures, the suffering of the mind. And not to add more tension because of it, but to include everything. But you're allowed to relax. That's the wonderful thing in *ānāpānasati* practice. You're allowed to relax the tension.

And as I said before, relaxing the tension is a way of dissolving our problems rather than solving them, relaxing our tensions rather than kind of having a boxing match with, you know, the thoughts and ideas that are there. Some people have talked about playing whack-a-mole with their thoughts. Whack-a-mole, if you don't know, is this thing where a board, I guess it has holes in it, and this little mole pops its head out and you're supposed to have a hammer and you're supposed to hit the mole over the head before he disappears. I don't know why it's fun. You know, I've tried the bazooka approach to thinking, I'm going to blast it out of existence. I had a little bit of fun for ten minutes once in a long meditation. I was imagining my mind was a pinball machine and playing pinball with my thoughts.

So all these things we can do. But the idea is rather than contending with them or whacking them away or bombing them, just relax. Relaxing is amazingly useful. You can relax too much, but the deeper tensions in the mind, deeper tensions in the heart, they can soften. And it may be not possible to soften them directly. Sometimes we can soften around the edges, soften around the edge of a tension, create a field of softness, of sweetness around it. It's okay to be tense. Remember, we're not trying to get rid of something. If anything, we're trying to say here, yes, you can be here too. Come. And in that warm embrace, things begin to relax and soften on their own.

And then as *Ānāpānasati* goes along, at some point there is a sense, a feeling comes along or an image of seeing happens or intuition that the mind or the heart, when there's none of this preoccupation in thoughts, none of this contraction and drive and attachments operating, that there's something quite beautiful about the mind itself, about mentality, the mental capacity, the awareness that can reside there. And some of that comes from becoming this movement towards gathering, collecting, concentrating, this word I used before, immersing. Like when we immerse ourselves in a nice wonderful bath, it feels really good to be immersed

in something, sometimes immersed in a soft bed. It's really great to be immersed in your own experience of your own lived life here and now, when you start gathering everything together and we stop having divisions in what is acceptable and not acceptable, and just that everything is here. There's no being kind of, that the mind is not at war with itself, the heart is not divided, and so things begin to soften more and more.

And it said in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* instructions is at some point, just like you're allowed to relax, believe it or not, in *ānāpānasati* practice, you're allowed to gladden your mind. You're allowed to help your mind feel content, happy. Exactly how I translate the *Pāli* word here. Most people translate as gladden the mind, please the mind, satisfy the mind. It's usually understood to mean that when the mind finally arrives here in the present, and it's not spinning out, it's not going off into thoughts and other places and other times, the mind wants to be here. It's gathered here. After a while, it's actually hard to leave the present moment. The mind really feels like it has arrived. It's here. It's stable. It's settled.

And the mind can feel very satisfying. The mind is very satisfying, the inner life, the inner feeling. And this is the ingredient, this deep satisfaction of willingness to be here for further gathering, further immersion. The mind naturally will come together, there's a natural settling. I like to think of it like a ball. So you put a ball on the edge of a hillside, it'll roll down until it comes to the bottom where it rests. And so the same thing with all the different balls we're juggling in our minds. When we finally let them roll downhill and rest, stop juggling them, then they'll come to be still.

And so this process of settling, gathering, settling, being sent here. And it might look like because we're doing breath meditation that now you're really flowing, you're in the groove, just being with the breath one after the other. It isn't like you have to make any effort anymore. It's like you're on a slide and you're just sliding along with the breath. Or the breath is waves and you become a surfer who's surfing right there along the breath, or, you know, the attention just has no interest in going away. Just kind of, some people say it's locked in, but it's connected in or fully immersed.

And then the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* talks about how when that happens, there can be a feeling of freedom. Freedom from obsessive thoughts. Freedom from the hindrances. Freedom from the strong pull of desire, the strong pull to ill will, the strong pull towards regrets and doubts, the strong pull towards doubt and indecision and uncertainty. And it can feel very nice. It can feel like a certain kind of freedom and liberation.

So, you know, we start talking this way in Buddhism about gathering together, the simplicity of the mind, the mind being immersed and concentrated and then free of these things. That's

pretty idealistic. And it can seem like a technique you're supposed to do this and develop, and you're looking ahead, am I there yet, and focus on that. But you're supposed to always be a beginner, which one of the things it means, just be present for the next moment, be present for this moment. Keep it really simple. Don't think about these other things I said today. All these things I said today are supposed to be an encouragement to don't think those things. Just be here with this as it is, as it is.

And in being here with this, is there some way that you can invite everything that is here together to be in harmony, come together? There's texts in Buddhism, ancient Buddhism, that describe *samādhi*, this gathering together, this concentration, immersion. And the synonym for it is harmony. And I like that word a lot, to be in harmony, because you get a very different feeling. Sometimes if you say you're supposed to get concentrated, boy, then we gear up and we bear down, and you know. But if we say you're supposed to be in harmony, like, you know, you can't really tense up that way. They require something else.

Another word that's associated with this *samādhi* or this *Ānāpānasati* going deep is beauty. A beautiful mind, a beautiful breathing, a beautiful body from the inside out. And so, oh, beauty. How do I touch into it? How do I get to my beauty if *samādhi* is about beauty? Like how do I get to that? Do I strive and huff and puff? Or do you have to be beautiful in how you practice? What's a beautiful practice? What's a beautiful attention? What's a beautiful presence? What's a beautiful attitude to have in the present moment that helps you want to stay here, want to be in this?

What's a harmonious way of holding your experience, meeting your experience? What kind of patience do you need to be able to be a beginner over and over and over again so something begins to relax and settle? Something begins opening that maybe it's not you doing it but it's the whole *dharma* doing it for you, it's the psychophysical system doing it for you. One of the wonderful ways of talking about practice that they have at the *Zen Center*, or at least they did in the old days when I was there, probably still, is at some point it isn't that you're practicing, but you're being practiced. The practice practices you.

At some point we're just there accepting, opening, allowing, feeling the breath, riding the breath, having a beautiful relationship to the present moment, not fighting and not struggling, not doubting, not critical, not opposed to anything, in harmony with all things, sitting in the beauty of all things. And it seems like the practice does you. Awareness does you. Being with a breath, cruising with a breath, is doing you. The breath is doing you. You're not doing the breathing. But don't try to make this happen now because I said so.

I'm hoping that these wonderful words, harmony, beauty, coming home, maybe there's

some reference point that you have for that that will inspire you to be here with all of who you are. Be here with yourself as you are in harmony and find a harmonious way of opening more and more to just this moment, just here, as you walk down the steps, this step, this step. As you walk across the floor to get tea, just be fully in the walking, be fully in the drinking of the tea, as opposed to walking and looking at every person going by and the note board and the schedule for the hundredth time, and you know, and just walking, just fully in the walking.

Where you understand, you value that there's something profound in connection to yourself and to the *dharma*, just being really here in the practice, that you lose if you spend too much time commenting on everyone's socks as you walk around, like look at that sock, what do they think they're doing, well that's the sock I want. And by the time you get to the tea you forgot you wanted tea because you're so caught up in what kind of socks you should order. It's so easy to kind of wander off and be disconnected from yourself because of the way. But just walk across, get tea, have a tea, sit down, just drink tea. But have the tea help you be at home here with your experience.

Here, coming home every moment, drop by drop you'll fill the bathtub. Drop by drop you'll fill yourself with beauty, fill yourself with harmony. And maybe you'll begin appreciating the little moments of freedom, the little moments of not clinging, little moments of not obsessing, little moments where you let something happen and just let it be. Don't have to do anything about it, just go. Just an event in a moment.

In *Ānāpānasati*, we're breathing in, one liberates the mind, breathing out then liberates the mind. The movement is that we're giving freedom to ourselves. Just like whenever you... Maybe what freedom is is you give freedom to everything. You don't appropriate it, you don't judge it, you don't comment on it, you don't make it into something, you don't resist it, you don't condemn it. Just give it its freedom, your mind, your thoughts, your emotions. They all have a place that can be all there, but with freedom where each thing is allowed to be just what it is and nothing more and nothing less, and doesn't have to be appropriated into me, myself, and mine. Thank you.