

Saturday dharma talk

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Many years ago, a Zen teacher that I had, that I studied with, said this interesting comment that really struck me at the time, and I come back to it periodically. He said that Buddha's contribution to humanity is the importance of sitting, meditating. Gandhi's contribution to humanity was that it matters where you sit, and it matters where. And so, you know, if you sit in IRC, that's pretty good, but that's quite different than sitting in the midst of injustice, or just sitting and meditating between people who are in conflict, for example. Like where you sit makes a difference.

San Francisco Zen Center, more so before, but maybe to some degree still, when people meditate at San Francisco Zen Center, they're sitting in what used to be quite a poor neighborhood, quite a violent neighborhood. And there are other retreat centers and places where they sit in wealthy neighborhoods. Some people would consider this a little bit wealthy. And so that's a very different effect, very different relationship to the environment and what goes on.

And given that the theme of this week is *Ānāpānasati*, the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, what it adds to the mix, not a particularly original idea, but yes, it matters where you sit, and the goal is to really sit where you are. That's the place, and wherever that might be. And to really understand or have some time in your life where you really get the experience of being fully, completely here. Some people describe it as having finally arrived. Wow, I'm really here and I'm not going anywhere.

I mean, I've had that experience where I'm days into the retreat, my mind is still somewhere else. Or it's so busy that I'm not really here. And then at some point, something shifts and, oh, oh, I'm really here now. I mean, it wasn't anywhere else, but my mind didn't know that. And now the mind is not going off anymore. For a few seconds, at least, it's decided to be here. Wow.

So I told this story to someone today. When I went to Tassajara, the Zen monastery, to be a monk there, I had had different plans. I was supposed to go to graduate school to study soil conservation, soil erosion. And my undergraduate degree was kind of in that area, and I knew very well how serious a problem it was for the world, the topic of soil erosion. And so I wanted to be involved in making a difference that way. But I ended up going to Tassajara instead.

But in the first period of time, especially if there was one whole year, I don't know if it started when I first arrived or when, but I know it was a year, where some of the most difficult, ongoing difficult time I had at Tassajara was not when we were doing Zen practice, but we had every fifth day or so, we had a so-called day off. And I would go walking in the mountains there. And that was really hard for me, because that's when I started thinking about, what am I going to do with my life? And, you know, what should I do? And where should I do? What kind of decision to make? And should I go back to college, go back to do my study? Should I stay here? Should I become a Zen priest? What should I do?

And I didn't really trust my ability to make a decision. I didn't trust the goodness of my intention. I doubted myself. And so for one year, I was racking my mind on these walks in the mountains. After about a year of doing this, it dawned on me that I'd been doing it for about a year. And I said, wow. I was like, wow, there's a whole year of this, and I can't get to any decision. I'm stuck. I don't know what to do.

And so I wouldn't say that this occurred to me, but it didn't occur to anybody else. This idea arose that was quite compelling, that said to me, start your life over. Start completely fresh from scratch now, and just see where the next step takes you. And so it kind of worked that way. I was able to just drop everything, and that was meaningful, this idea.

But luckily, maybe for me, I think I was extremely lucky that I made that decision kind of in the mountains, where the path only went back to the monastery. And so the next step went down there. And I got there, they rang a bell for meditation, so that was the next, you know. So, you know, just take one step at a time, go to the next thing. But it made a huge difference where I made that decision.

I made that decision in a Zen monastery where the next step was go to the *zendo*, go do this, do the monastic life. And so that life kind of started to grow in me and develop in me. And I was able to be part of that, and in that, be present there much more than I had before, because I was starting over again. I wasn't thinking about anything else.

So *Ānāpānasati*, in its own way, is bringing us to that kind of just come here, be here, and in

a certain kind of way, just allow the next step to arise, allow the next moment to arise, and really be with it, and be in it, and don't doubt it, don't be elsewhere. And in the mountain, in the story, I was walking in the mountain, so I walked back to Tassajara. In the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, as kind of a metaphor, that walking back to the monastery is the first 12 steps of *Ānāpānasati*. And that's where there's a little bit of doing that goes on, a little bit of something we contribute to.

And then at the 12th step, the last four, that's where we stop all doing. Because we're so fully in the present, we can trust what's going to unfold and just be there. And in the first 12 steps, the amount of doing is close to nothing. Mostly we're learning to undo a lot of things. Undo our preoccupations and attachments and reactivities and all kinds of things that we've built up.

And so there's a lot of learning to undo, but knowing is a kind of doing that we're told to do. Feeling and sensing your experience is a little bit of a doing. Maybe it's next to nothing, but it's something. And then you have to do this more complicated thing. It tells you to relax, to calm. That's a kind of a doing.

What's wonderful about relaxing being a doing, calming being a doing, is you can't really do it and get stressed. You can't really do it stressfully. It doesn't work. It's kind of built into it that if you want it to work, you have to not be in a hurry. You're not going to look at your watch and say, I have 10 seconds to do this well. I'm going to really get, this is competitive relaxation. The person who's fastest. You know, it's kind of built in, because you have the feedback system of, you feel, know what you're doing, so you can see that straining to relax doesn't work.

And maybe, you know, what Paul offered was, the doing that he offered was from the *sutta*, is maybe the most complicated idea, gladdening the mind. What? Gladdening the mind? Yeah.

But I liken the first 12 steps to *Ānāpānasati* to the first of the two major movements that's understood in Buddhist practice, kind of the map of Buddhism. The first is walking. You know, the primary metaphor for Buddhism is a path. And in ancient India, you didn't take an Uber. You had to walk. Most people knew. There were chariots and horses, but most people couldn't afford them. So most people, including the Buddha, walked everywhere. And so walking a path was kind of the metaphor for getting started in the practice. That there is something we have to offer.

And then there comes a point where it's clear that we've arrived enough here that now we can

trust and allow something to do us, allow something to carry us. And the metaphor for that is a word that's not quite accurate, but it's called stream-entry, which is the first stage of really maturing and really arriving in the Dharma, where the Dharma is really now carrying you. But literally, the word stream-entry means entering the current of the stream of the river. And so I used to think that entering the stream was the first step to get to the other side, because the other shore sometimes is a description of liberation. But that was mixing metaphors.

But the metaphor here is that of entering the stream that's going to carry you, the current's going to carry you, entering the current and letting the current carry you downriver. And that metaphor of being carried is used frequently in the *suttas*, being carried by a current, being carried by the flow of a river, downriver. And here you might have to have a little role. And the Buddha said, using that metaphor, he said that if you're being carried down the river, just don't grab the branches from the trees or the grass on the side. Stay off the banks of the river. Stay in the middle. So it takes a little bit of care to stay there in the middle. But the idea is something's carrying us.

And a little bit, you know, to really appreciate that we have these two movements in practice, is that when a bell rings for most of you who are downstairs, the bell rings to come to meditation, you have to chug up those steps. You have to put energy and effort in, coming up those steps. I mean, you have to do that. You can't just hear the bell and just say, okay, well, I'll teleport. I'll just suddenly appear in the meditation hall effortlessly.

You have to put effort to come up here. And some of you might choose to do more of the effortless way, and so you use the elevator. Okay. But you still have to put yourself in the elevator and you have to push the button, so there's some effort. And then when you come here, now you can let go of effort. Now you can let go of a lot.

But to get here you had to do something. So there is this wonderful play in practice with what we offer and what we receive in practice. So rather than calling it doing, maybe we call it offering. We offer our attention. And when we offer our attention, something comes in return. And as Paul has spoken very nicely about, pay attention to what comes back, what that experience is like of offering attention and seeing what arises, what comes back.

And so in *Ānāpānasati*, the direction of the practice is to arrive here, and along the way, there are these milestones along the way. And one is that the tendency to not be here quiets down. The reactivity of the mind, the busyness of the mind, the activation of the mind that keeps us spinning out in thoughts, it quiets down, quiets down. And it can be quite delicious to feel the simplicity of awareness, simplicity of the mind itself, when it starts feeling like it's free of all the reactivity, all the preoccupations.

It's considered to be a form of wonderful joy to no longer have your mind taken hostage by the hindrances, where you're caught in those desires, or caught in aversions, caught in kind of torpor, caught in anxiety and restlessness, caught in doubt. And I've certainly been delighted, you know, to be sitting on a retreat for days with a particular hindrance, like why doesn't it leave me alone? And then finally, ah. This is good, just to be finally not spinning out so much.

So this idea of moving towards simplicity, the radical simplicity of mind, where we start feeling it's safe enough not to be defending ourselves, proving ourselves, becoming someone, you know. The mind is kind of a wonderful caretaker of us. It's trying in all kinds of ways to make us safe, but at some point it doesn't do a very good job. It's a little confused. And so it's just to begin to let the mind relax and reassure the mind.

I loved it that Paul talked this morning or last night or both. I think both. He used the word reassurance. And it turns out that the Pāli word for reassurance, I don't quite remember at the moment, literally means breathing easily. Isn't that nice for *Ānāpānasati* people? That to be reassured is to breathe with ease, easily.

So finally, to be able to come here and just breathe easily, feel safe, feel content, feel like it's good, it's worthwhile, it's meaningful. There's nothing else that needs to happen, wants to happen. And so what Paul called the composition, the composing oneself, settling oneself here, is part of this arriving here. And a little bit it's a matter of letting go and trusting that the spiritual gravity of our hearts will allow things to settle here. Here, here, can I get out of the way? And it feels quite good to finally arrive here.

And in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, this finally being here, the mind is steady and stable in the present moment without going anywhere else. That is called a form of liberation in the *Ānāpānasati, vimutti*. It's a kind of a liberation, liberated from being everywhere else.

And then the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* changes, and the last four no longer talks about doing anything. There's no doing described. What's described, in this, when you arrive here and you're not doing anything, the mind's natural capacity to observe kicks in. And each of the last four steps talks about one observes something. But it doesn't say, look, one looks at. It's a description of a way of being where we're settled back and the mind's eye just observes what's here.

And what's very significant about this idea of observe, like with your eye, is the eye itself, when it sees something, does not normally interfere with what's being seen. You might interfere. You might have judgments and ideas and all kinds of things, reactions to it. But the

eyes themselves just allow each thing to be what it is. Unless it's a person and you're staring at them. But, you know, I think you will go along with this. I'm saying, you know, the eye doesn't do anything with the thing. It just observes.

And so to have that ability to leave things radically alone, let each thing that is observed in the present moment have its pristine simplicity, allow each thing to be itself. And we discover in the process how simple we can allow it to be. And so, you know, I might sit here and see this as a bell. That's pretty simple. But as the mind gets simpler, the memory, the idea, the association with the word B-E-L-L recedes. And I'm sitting here with color and shape and light and smoothness. It just becomes so simple. It's a phenomenon that is in and of itself. And we say it's a bell, but it doesn't have to be a bell.

Many years ago, I was driving down Mission Street in downtown San Francisco, and there were some people begging. And there was one beggar who I drove by, and I said, wow, he's holding a Japanese bell, like this one. What is a beggar doing with a Japanese bell? I thought, should I go back and buy it from him? It was quite beautiful.

And so that was not a bell, it was a begging bowl then for him. I thought that was, you know, these things, everything can change. The name we give it based on function. My teacher in Burma, he has something like this next to his right knee. I won't demonstrate. It was a spittoon. That was a regular thing, part of a Dharma talk. I don't know if I'd get away with it in America. I don't know if I'd get away with it in America.

So, you know, it doesn't have to be called a bell. It doesn't have to be called anything. Just sights and sounds that, you know, we take in. So in the first step, in this last tetrad, is seeing change. Seeing how things are changing all the time. Seeing how usually in English we call it impermanence, but it isn't that you see that everything ends, that kind of impermanence, but you see the inconstancy of experience. It's constantly changing and moving and shifting.

Some things return, disappear and come back, disappear and come back, but everything has changed. And this represents the river with the current. The river is always changing. That's the nature of a river. It's always moving. It's never stationary, otherwise it would be a pond or something. It's always flowing.

And so at some point, when we finally arrive here, what's left to be seen is how everything is constantly, all our experiences, how we experience, how we perceive, the mind is constantly shifting and changing in such a way that every sense experience is flowing, moving, changing. And it's a little bit of a paradox, because you can't really see that in this very deep elemental way if the mind is flowing and spinning in thoughts and ideas and concerns and preoccupa-

tions. So if the mind is flowing, you can't see reality flowing. But if the mind gets still, then you can see the flow of reality. So it's a wonderful kind of switch that goes on.

And that's part of the purpose of quieting the mind, is that we're not overlaying reality with our meaning-making, our associations, our concepts, our judgments, our stories. So to really arrive here and feel a sense of ease, breathing easily, reassured, feeling safe, feeling comfortable, feeling that this is meaningful. It's meaningful because this is healthy. This is like a healthy way of being. It's unhealthy to be divided. It's unhealthy to be stressed. It's unhealthy to be kind of spinning.

This is like really good to finally arrive and be here, this radical simplicity of being, and to trust it, to be reassured by it, and then to see that everything is changing and flowing. It's not necessarily an easy observation to make because it's so different than our ordinary life where we want object stability. And we want things to be reliable and always be there in a solid way. But if you know how to float, it's really fun to float down rivers. I've done it.

I remember once with my extended family and a whole bunch of kids, cousins and stuff, my kids, and I went to this river, wonderful river. It wasn't very deep. But you would walk up in the river to where the little rapids were. Just after the rapids, you'd stop there, and you'd get in the water, and you'd put your feet down the river, pointing up. And it was fun. It would carry you down.

But what was really neat was there was an eddy. So it would carry you down, and then the eddy would turn you around and carry you up almost as far as you came from. And that was so much fun, this big circle and upriver, flowing upriver. I mean, how often do you get to do that over and over again? You know, that was just fun.

So at some point, just willingly allowing ourselves to kind of settle back, relax even further with that change that's happening, right? It's kind of the inherent change that's always here anyway, but we seldom notice it. We seldom, because we're not seeing things as changing objects, we're seeing things as being stable. And so we observe that.

And then the way that this *Ānāpānasati* continues, once we're in the flow of change, in this relaxed, settled, quiet way, then the observation continues. And one observation, the next observation, is to see that the remaining attachments we have, the remaining strong desires or clinging or conceits that we brought with us, you start seeing this, they begin to fade away because they're not being fed, they're not being encouraged. They too are in inconstant and changing circumstances. And so they kind of begin, maybe they're frozen, but when everything goes into that river of change, the ice cubes begin to melt. And they all kind of begin

flowing together and kind of disappearing.

And so there's this gradual process of fading away. And this is a very important concept to understand in this practice, that you don't have to let go, you don't have to get rid of things, you don't have to be the agent of all the change that's involved. You have a role, for sure. There's agency and activities that you're responsible for doing practice. But also, you have to know what you don't do. You have to also know how to get out of the way, how to trust deeply this moment and allow things to unfold on their own, the kind of natural movement of life that can happen in this deep stillness when you arrive.

And I know I was kind of blown away when I started seeing in practice how much unfolded naturally if I got out of the way. And this flowing, this movement, there's two different kinds of movements that happen, two different flows. One is that all sense experiences, all perceptions, become all just a river of change. All of this. The other change, which is not so random, is that the inner landscape, the inner qualities of mind, qualities of heart, the way that we experience our life, experience ourselves, that also begins to change in a very natural way.

And so there's this natural movement towards healthier and healthier, clearer and clearer, deeper and deeper states of being that we don't, again, orchestrate, you can't, but we learn how to get out of the way. We learn to trust that in this flow, being in the flow, that a variety of things begin to move too. And a lot of it is the fading away of attachments, fading away of deep, deep attachments we might have.

And then the next step is observing the endings. Observing from time to time certain things that we were used to doing have stopped. Many, many years ago, I was teaching up here at Jikoji retreats, and there were long weekend retreats. A woman who had been at the weekend retreat, three-day retreat, the year before came back and said, Gil, that was great, that last retreat. It changed me completely in a certain way. I used to be really cynical, and since that retreat, I stopped being cynical. Really? Was that easy?

But the idea was so complete. The common pattern in her mind had just stopped. Something shifted. And so things do change. Sometimes things stop. Sometimes the qualitative experience of something, some attachment, some preoccupation, some way of being that have been dogging us for a lifetime, maybe it doesn't go away permanently, but the feeling, wow, it's really not there. For now, it's really stopped. This is possible. Wow.

And that's reassuring. That can be quite inspiring. Not to do more of it, but the core, I find the best way of being inspired by the goodness of practice is that it's a confirmation of the practice. Oh, the practice works. So let's practice more. Let's trust the practice more. Not,

let's get this experience again.

And then it comes to the fourth, the last tetrad. One observes letting go. So sometimes things stop, and you don't quite know why, and sometimes they can stop forever. But also there's this very healthy movement of release, feeling something being released, something is dropping, something is shedding, something that was there maybe all the time says goodbye.

The analogy that, again, is used in the *suttas* a little bit, but not quite my kind of reworking of it, is they describe how sailors who are out at sea, far from land, trying to find their way to land, will have a bird along in the boat, and then they release the bird. And if the bird flies up and up and up and around and high up looking for land, if it doesn't find land, it comes back to the boat. But if it sees land, it flies towards it. And then the sailors know that's the direction to go. But this idea of, you know, something, our hands open, we hold things lightly, and who knows what bird will take off, will release and flow. Maybe never coming back.

So sitting is important, and where you sit is important. And certainly, it's good to sit in places where there's injustice, maybe as a way of saying no to the injustice. But often enough, the injustice is right here in ourselves. That's where something is off. And it's a powerful thing to be able to really, the place to sit is really right here wherever you are. Wherever you are is the place to sit. Wherever you are is the place of practice.

They say sometimes that wherever you are is the *Bodhimaṇḍa*. *Bodhimaṇḍa* is the place in India under the Bodhi tree where the Buddha was enlightened. And to say anywhere you are is your *Bodhimaṇḍa*, I mean, that's your place for awakening, not someplace else. So here, and to trust the movement towards it, and to practice in harmony with it, to practice in harmony with this simplification, this non-striving, to practice in harmony with the goal of freedom.

To practice in harmony with the goal of freedom is to practice freely, to practice with as little attachment, little clinging, little striving as you can, so it can get simpler and simpler. So you can begin arriving here, arriving here and being at rest here. Why? So you can see clearly, which is what *vipassanā* means, clear seeing. So you can really observe something very profound about what only can be seen if you've arrived, fully arrived here.

And what inspires me a lot is that it's kind of like the sacred temple is you. The sacred *zendo* is you, here, in your body and mind. This is where it's all found. This is where the Dharma is. This is where the Buddha is. This is really special. You don't have to go elsewhere to discover the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. It's all here. Come here. Be here. Be here.

And as we come to the end of this retreat, I know that many of you, most of you, all of you,

have had times it's been a great challenge to be here and practice. And I've known and talked to some of you and heard about how you came to the other side of that. And what I saw in that process was you did good practice. You stayed in. You stayed with it. You didn't leave. You hung in there and practiced and practiced.

And one of the core things I really like to try to leave people with is practice. Remember to practice. Jack Kornfield was famous for coining the idea, after the ecstasy, the laundry. My book will say, after the laundry, practice. Before the laundry, practice. Before the ecstasy, practice. After the ecstasy, practice. Just practice. Come back to practice. And trust it. Trust the practice. Trust the simplicity of it.

And to carry that with you as a support for your life, for the difficulties of life, being very careful not to hold on to anything that you get from practice. One of the common ways to suffer after the end of the retreat is to think that you're supposed to stay calm or stay peaceful or stay settled or, you know, you're supposed to hold on to this as long as you can. And you can be welcome to try. But just generally, that's a guaranteed way to suffer. Okay.

A much nicer thing to do is that whatever, if you say you're calmer here, more settled, is just, as you notice it's starting to fade away, rather than being upset, rather than thinking, oh no, this is, you know, a disaster, turn it around, and just imagine you're giving your calm to the world. Here, you can have it. Maybe there, who knows, there might be a law of the conservation of calm. So, you know, it just was concentrated in you for a while, and give it away, give it away. It feels so much better than trying to hold on and being, you know, upset that it's going. Just here, here. Okay. Live a life of generosity.

And I'll end with another kind of appreciation of this mindfulness of breathing. Yes, it can bring you deep reassurance in the sense that it comes along with breathing easily, having an easeful breath. Okay. And that became a very important, it is a very important reference point for me in living my life. I pay attention to how my breath is. It's kind of like a, I wouldn't say a constant, but it's a second nature to be aware of my breathing, to know how it is, to know when it's tight, when it's caught.

And so it's kind of a check and balance for me, so that I notice if I lose my ease. Okay, now it's time to come back to it. And that's a real primary reference point for me in my practice. Is there ease here, ease in my breathing, or not? If there is, keep doing what I'm doing. If there isn't, pay attention, practice with it.

So maybe we can take a couple of minutes to just be here. Okay. In whatever manifestation of here, your whole psychophysical system is manifesting for you. Thank you.