

Supports for Practice: Aspiration, Trust, Courage

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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So many of us, we have this idea that we'd like to have a mindfulness practice. Presumably, that's part of the reason why you're here. And we're practicing in the middle of our life. We're not sitting in a cave somewhere isolated from everything, but instead, we're practicing—whatever we might define practice as—trying to be present for our life, present for ourselves. We're doing this in the midst of work, relationships, health issues, and all kinds of difficulties.

And so there's this way in which we may come to the cushion, so to speak, to meditate. Sometimes we might arrive and feel inspired and think, "Okay, I'm ready, I'm going to practice, I'm going to do mindfulness." Or, as is very often the case, I'm imagining you come to the cushion distracted, bored, irritated, or uninspired.

There's this way in which we might think, "Well, I just need to have more willpower. I should have more self-discipline. I should have more effort so that I'll just get to the cushion," which, of course, I'm using just to symbolize meditating, whether you're sitting on a cushion or not. We have this idea that we should just force ourselves to come to the cushion. And if only we were better somehow, then we would meditate more regularly, or meditation would be easier, or it would be having the transformation in our lives that we're hoping for, that we're wishing for.

But practice needs support. It's not just about willpower. It needs some nourishment. We might say it needs some encouragement. It needs some conditions. Of course, it does. Especially when, let's be honest, it seems like so much of our society is promoting the opposite of being present for your life. It's all about, "Here's how to distract yourself. Here's one more thing." There's even an advertisement—some like, "Indulge, you deserve it." I'm not saying there is anything wrong with doing something nice for oneself, but if the message that we get all the time is like, "Forget about dreams you might have, things you want to do, just indulge in whatever you feel like in this moment," in order to do something that's different than the message that we get in so many different ways and media, it takes support.

So a question we might ask is, what supports us in turning towards life? What supports us in turning towards being with our experience, meditating, having a practice, or whatever it is you want to do—something that's important to you that you want to do? What's a support when we forget? What's a support when we'd rather just avoid and distract? What's a support when it just feels dry and mechanical and uninspiring?

What's a support when we feel afraid? We don't even quite know why, but we just don't want to sit still. It's not something maybe we can clearly articulate. Or what if we just don't even know why, we just don't want to? We need some support.

So I'd like to offer some supports for practice. Three things, three activities that can be a support. This is not part of any Buddhist lists. In fact, most of these words aren't even on Buddhist lists. But these are things that I think can be helpful and they have been helpful for me in my life, to maybe articulate them and to have them in mind as something, as opposed to this sense of, "Okay, I just have to try harder."

Aspiration

The first support I'd like to offer is this idea of aspiration. What do we care about? What do we want our life to be about? What is the heart's direction? What matters to us?

This isn't pressure. This isn't about having the inner critic rise up and say, "Oh, you should do this and do that." It's just worthwhile sometimes to check in on what matters to us. What do we want to live toward?

And so this isn't so much about what do we *want*, because want has this feeling of grasping and reaching. Like holding on to something, what we want often involves comparing and measuring and all that kind of stuff. Aspiration is something different. Aspiration is more about opening or softening. What helps us to feel like, "Yeah, that's a direction I want to go," maybe in the way in which you wish upon a star when you see a shooting star or something like that.

So aspiration is a way which can give practice meaning. Why are we doing this? Why are we doing meditation practice? Because we don't want our meditation practice to be another project, another task, but instead can we have the heart get involved? Is there a way in which we can remember what's important to us and align this with what's important? It's not always easy to remember this. So, it's worthwhile. Sometimes we find things to remember, practical things, post-it notes, reminders on the calendar, whatever it is for you. But then the risk of doing that is that it turns into a project or a task. But allowing your heart to touch into what it really wants can be a powerful support.

Sometimes we might say that what we want is freedom. And we can define freedom as not being pushed around, but instead the freedom to do what you believe is the right thing to do for you at that moment. Instead of always chasing our preferences, like, "Oh, I feel uncomfortable with that. I can't do that. I have to avoid this person because they might say that thing that they said last time," or whatever it might be.

So freedom—there's so many different ways that it can be understood, defined. Maybe freedom is an aspiration. Or maybe truth is seeing clearly about ourselves, about others, about

the nature of reality. Maybe to see clearly is an aspiration, to no longer be confused about what's important or what you want to do with your life.

Or maybe truth and love. Maybe to give love, receive love, to be warm-hearted, to be open, to be connected. Maybe this is an aspiration.

I offer these just as suggestions. Each of you might have your own. But maybe just an encouragement to dream big. Why not? Have a big, beautiful life. So aspiration can be a support for mindfulness practice or for anything that you want to do.

Trust

But there's a way in which aspiration often isn't sufficient. It can't help us get to the cushion necessarily single-handedly. Sometimes it can, but often we need something more. And I'd like to suggest this idea of trust.

Trust as this second support. So trust is this... it's not this blind belief that like, "Okay, if I'm going to do this, then everything's going to be fine." Sometimes we might associate this word trust with faith or belief, and then that starts to sound like, "Oh, I just have to adopt some doctrine or some creed or something like this." That's not what I'm saying, and it's not what's being pointed to.

Buddhist practice is definitely about trust that comes from experience. So we might call it confidence that comes from experience. Not because anybody told you anything in particular. It's more of just having realized that, "Oh yeah, after I meditate, things are a little bit more clear or I feel a little bit better." Not always. There's no guarantee that when you sit down to meditate it's going to be great and that all the answers are going to be known to all the questions you have. No guarantees about this. Sometimes you'll get up from the cushion and think like, "Wow, okay, I'm not sure what that was all about."

But there's something that happens. Say that you have a meditation session and the mind is busy going everywhere except where you were thinking that you wanted it to go. You wanted to be settled and calm, and the mind is rehearsing something it's going to do in the future and rehashing something that happened in the past, and it's busy, busy. You spend the whole time just thinking and then the timer goes off. You're like, "Oh, wow. Okay." But there's something that happens if you have stayed with it. And what happens is you realize, "Oh, that wasn't so bad. I survived that."

We often have this idea that meditation has to look a particular way. And if it doesn't look that way, well, we should just abandon it or go do something else or pick up these small rectangular devices we like to carry in our pockets. There's a way in which there's a certain amount of confidence like, "Oh, okay. Yeah, so a session that felt like the mind was really busy wasn't the

end of the world, wasn't the end of anything, it was okay." And that's a little bit of this confidence.

Because there will also be sessions in which afterwards you feel like there's a more settledness or calmness, or a sense of ease or openness or softness that opens up and you realize, "Oh yeah, okay, this is great. I do feel a bit more relaxed, less anxious. I feel like I can find my way through this particular difficulty." And that gives confidence too, that with practice it can be a support for your life.

So this trust begins in this lived experience. Not only on the meditation cushion, but when we notice that when we pause in the midst of maybe a difficult conversation, or pause before hitting send on that text or that email that had a little biting tone to it. Or maybe confidence grows when we realize that just meeting that difficult person with some kindness, and noticing that the interaction shifts when you don't respond in a way that is meeting hostility with hostility.

You may feel like, "I don't know. I don't have any of this trust. I don't have any of this confidence. I don't have any of this faith. Somebody's making me sit and meditate and I'm just doing it because I'm supposed to." I love this expression that I heard first from Andrea Fella years ago. She used this well, "Trust can be borrowed. Use somebody else's trust." And what she meant by that is maybe there's a teacher, a book, somebody who gives a dharma talk, a podcast you listen to, and they seem to have a lot of trust or they're talking about how having a practice has changed their life. There can be a way it's like, "Well, if it worked for them, maybe it can work for me." Or they seem to talk about how their life has been changed, or they seem to have the qualities I would like to cultivate. "So, I'm going to borrow their trust." I like this idea because it somehow takes the pressure off of having to feel inspired or trusting all the time.

So, maybe it's not even an individual, maybe it's a community. Maybe there's something about coming to practice together that really supports that. I know for me, early in my meditation practice, I would often sit with others and honestly, when I look back on it, sometimes it was just pure peer pressure why I didn't get up and just run out. I just felt like, "Oh, I don't want to be here." But sometimes it was just like, "Okay, well, everybody else is sitting quietly and I don't want to disturb anybody. I guess I'll stay." And then this confidence started to grow, and my ability to sit still just started to grow. Not because I did any heroic efforts. It was just coming to, exactly as you guys are. It's coming to sit, and then staying even though I felt like leaving. So in some ways, we could call that borrowing trust, having the support from the community.

But trust doesn't remove difficulties. It doesn't make the difficulties go away. It just gives us a belief and understanding that we can meet some of our aspirations, that things that are important to us are possible. There's a way in which they could happen. There's a way forward.

Courage

But there can be a way in which there's difficulty. There's pain, there's fear, maybe we're not even clear what the barrier or the hesitation is. There's just something. So even though we have trust, even though we have aspiration, it might not be enough. We could use some other supports, something else. And I'd like to offer a third support, and this is courage.

And this certainly was not something that I expected on my meditation journey. It certainly isn't on the Buddhist lists we hear. Courage is not fearlessness. It's recognizing that there is fear and not fleeing. As best we can, staying.

Some of you will be familiar with this story in the Buddha's awakening. Before he was awakened, he sat down underneath a Bodhi tree and said that he wasn't going to move until he became completely awakened. That's a tremendous amount of confidence after having practiced for many years, and he felt like, "Okay, this is so important to me, I'm just going to make this happen in some way."

So he's sitting under the Bodhi tree meditating when Mara^[1] shows up. Mara is a personification... it gets interpreted in different ways. I like to think of it as what gets in the way. So the story is that Mara shows up with a whole battalion of all these creatures that are throwing things at the Buddha while he's sitting there under the tree. Rocks and mud and fire and all these things are getting thrown at the Buddha. And he does something very difficult. He stays. He stays there under the tree. He doesn't run away.

And then in one version of the story with his meditation, these arrows that are like fire or the mud and the rocks and lava... I don't remember all the things that are getting thrown at him... Many of them get turned into flowers. Just the power of his... I don't know what it was exactly. Just the willingness to be with whatever was arising. The willingness to say, "You know, I've run away so many times. What happens when I don't?"

I feel inspired by this actually. It takes courage, because sometimes what happens when we're meditating is we start to have insights. And some of these insights include understanding about our self—greater self-understanding. And I heard Gil^[2] say this years ago and I remember this. He said something along the lines of, "This self-understanding, this greater understanding about ourselves, like what makes us tick and how we work, this kind of thing is rarely good news." It's more like, "Oh, I didn't realize I had that really bad habit or this pattern of avoiding or distraction or blaming or anger, or all these things that we do when we encounter difficulties." And it's often not until we actually do sit still and meet them that we start to learn some of our patterns of meeting difficulties.

And what's happening on the cushion is the exact same thing that happens in our daily life. So we start to learn about ourselves in a way that maybe we hadn't seen before. Some of our blind

spots. And sometimes it takes courage to see like, "Oh yeah, sometimes I'm kind of a jerk when I feel confused. I just am short with people and start bossing them around just because I want to feel less confused." Or maybe you start to see how you shut down and collapse and just stop meeting the world when there are difficulties. And that can be really difficult to move away from, or to bring some enlivening and stay connected.

So courage isn't the elimination of fear. It's meeting fear. Staying present with whatever is arising when you feel like you'd rather not. And sometimes... I told this little story about Mara and the Buddha, and so often we might think of courage as some heroic, big movement, but often it's just a quiet staying. Maybe a little pause. Maybe being with the breath. A few more breaths before the mind jumps off. Maybe it's just one honest recognition. This takes courage. Maybe it's just a willingness to not turn away.

And of course, we practice courage in a way that suits who we are and where we are at that moment. I'm not saying that we always have to stay with the most difficult thing no matter what. That's not always the wise thing to do. But it's not always wise to bounce off and distract and avoid either. So each of us has to find our balance of how much can we meet difficulty and how much do we need to make sure that we have enough resources and support before we really meet those difficulties. Each of us has to find that for ourselves.

This isn't all about like this warrior going in no matter what, like this story that I told of the Buddha. That's a story, I don't know what happened, but I do appreciate this idea that somebody had this determination and he stayed.

So courage may be quiet, and it may just be this facing the suffering, but one thing it is, is that it remains open. It allows us to remain open even in the midst of vulnerability, because the truth is, humans are vulnerable. We are. We don't like to be. Of course we don't. We are emotionally vulnerable. We are physically vulnerable. Our feelings get hurt. We get sick. Things that we love, people that we care about, creatures we care about die. Our heart gets broken. This is what it means to be a human. And so courage is, despite this vulnerability, can we stay open? That is, can we allow our hearts to be touched? Can we allow ourselves to feel the fear and how much we don't want to feel the vulnerability or feel the discomfort?

So courage doesn't make us invulnerable. It just prevents us from completely shutting down or armoring up. And there's this way that courage is about just beginning again. Sometimes it feels like hope feels faint, like there's just not a lot of hope, and there can be sometimes a way in which we want to collapse after a failure, let's say, or collapse after a big loss, or after a disappointment or these things that happen in our lives.

Courage asks us to be able to feel the pain. It's kind of like honoring our experience, because of course there's grief. Of course there's sadness. Of course, maybe there's some anger or

confusion. And can we meet them in a way that's wise and helpful and supportive without turning away? But to begin again. And to begin again, it might sound like a small thing, but it's not small. In fact, we could say that all a practice is about is just this—beginning again and again. This act of trust, maybe some aspiration and courage.

Reflections

So aspiration, trust, and courage. I'd like to offer some supports for practice for whatever is actually important for you. We could say that aspiration gives a direction, and without aspiration, courage may not know its direction. It may encourage you to just keep on pushing and pushing even though it's not going in a direction that provides more freedom, for example.

Or there's a way in which trust steadies the heart, because without trust, courage may become strain. It's just about me showing that I can do it to myself or to others. Or there's this way that without courage, aspiration and trust may just remain ideas. It means something like, "Oh, yeah, that sounds good. I'll get to that eventually. As soon as my life is fixed, I have everything perfect," or something like that.

So practice isn't something that we force through pure willpower, but instead we need to support it. And tonight I'm offering three supports. Aspiration: to connect to what really matters to us. Trust: trust yourself. Trust that there is a way forward. And courage: even if there is difficulty or uncomfortableness, can you stay with it in a way that—again, for each of us this will be different what that looks like—but in a way that is wise and supportive of the life that you'd want.

So may we remember what matters. May we trust what supports freedom, and however you define freedom for yourself. And may we have courage to turn towards this life with an open heart. Aspiration, trust, and courage. Thank you.

Q&A

And with that, I'd like to open it up now to see if there's some questions or comments.

Okay. Oh, we'll use the microphone back here. Thank you, Jim.

Questioner: Hi. You talked about feeling the fear. How do you feel the fear without being overwhelmed by it, by entering into it?

Diana Clark: Yeah. How do you feel fear without being overwhelmed by it? There's a few things we can do. One is to really feel the experience in the body. The mind is kind of like, "Oh my gosh, this is going to happen and then this is going to happen." The mind is making stories. By definition, fear is encouraging these future thoughts. But to be with the experience, feel the lump in the throat, the knot in the belly, maybe the heart is beating faster. And so in that way, to

be with what's actually happening now interrupts all the future-thinking thoughts that accompany fear. I'm not talking about tigers or being hit by a car or anything like this. I'm talking about other types of fear.

So to be present in the moment in the bodily experience. But sometimes that alone isn't even enough. Or we don't have access to that. So something to make it even simpler is to like, feel your feet on the ground, just to feel like, "Okay, no, I'm here." And then the mind is going to want to say, "No, no, no, there's this thing and you got to take care of this and blah blah blah." And there's a way in which you can say, "I'm going to think about that later. Right now I'm just going to be with my feet on the ground and take a couple of breaths." And then the mind will protest, and then you will say, "No, no, I'll get to this later, but right now I'm just going to be with my feet on the ground and a few breaths."

So it's not the first time you come to the bodily experience. The mind will still want to pull you away, but it's the thoughts that are making the fear feel unbearable and overwhelming. And we can interrupt the thoughts by being with the physical experience. Is that helpful?

Questioner: Yeah.

Diana Clark: And I think over here there was a question too. Is that right? You don't have to if you've changed your mind.

Questioner: Well, related to fear, something which a lot of people including me sometimes are afraid of is death. And this is also a Buddhist motivation to practice: death. So it's interesting.

Diana Clark: Yeah. So there's a lot of practices associated with fear of death and some of you might be familiar with this. I'll just say a few of them briefly, and Daniel, I imagine you know them. Maraṇassati^[3], mindfulness of death. There are guided meditations, you imagine this is your last hour or week, day, hour, a minute, or something like this. Or imagine what it's like, death. So just this practice turning towards it. This is the courage part, right? You actually just turn towards it. Everything that has the nature to be born has the nature to die. It's not a mystery. We all know this and yet somehow we're avoiding this.

So one is to intentionally bring mindfulness to death. And then another one is just these five recollections, and one of the recollections is to say, "I am of the nature to die"^[4], I think is the saying for it. So these are some of these practices, and then people who do this practice discover that their life starts to become more meaningful, it starts to become more tender, that they start to become more present for everything, and more joy starts to arise. We all have this idea it's going to be morose or macabre or a little crazy. It turns out to be a lot of freedom. To turn towards what we fear gives freedom.

You can go on retreats that are all about death meditation and they end up being so joyful at the end. It's when you turn towards something that you feel like you've been avoiding so much and you finally look at it and it's kind of normalized and you're within a community like, "Oh, okay. Yeah, I'm going to die and so are you and so are you and so are you."

So, okay. Thank you. Thank you for your kind attention. Wish you a wonderful rest of the evening and safe travels home. Thank you.

1. **Mara:** In Buddhism, Mara is the personification of the forces antagonistic to enlightenment. [↵](#)
2. **Gil:** Refers to Gil Fronsdal, the founding teacher at the Insight Meditation Center. [↵](#)
3. **Maraṇassati:** A Buddhist meditation practice of remembering that death will strike everyone. Often translated as "mindfulness of death." [↵](#)
4. **Five Recollections:** Subjects for daily contemplation by all Buddhists, traditionally found in the Upajjhatthana Sutta. They include contemplating aging, illness, death, separation from loved ones, and being the heir to one's actions (karma). [↵](#)

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