

Monday sit with instructions

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So this morning, I'll start with some introductory remarks about the instructions that I'll be giving, a little teaching, and then more of the instructions. So the general thing about these instructions is that I offer them in the backdrop of you all being experienced practitioners. You know the basic instructions in mindfulness that we teach, or that you've learned already. And so you're welcome to continue practicing the way that you feel is your way now.

I respect that you're an experienced practitioner. You have a sense of how to practice for yourself. So you're welcome to, as I offer instructions through the retreat, decide for yourself how well they fit to augment what you're doing, to support what you're doing, or maybe sometimes to offer an alternative to what you're doing. But it's for you to find. I'm not expecting you to follow everything I teach, like, this is what you're supposed to have to do.

You're welcome to follow the unfolding that I offer in the instructions. You're welcome to make that the primary way you practice, and you're welcome to adjust or adapt as you see fit. And then, when we meet for the one-on-one meetings, that's where we'll work with that together and refine it. And I'll support you whatever choice you make. I'd like to hear how you're practicing and how you're using it.

Into a little bit of teaching. So in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, it begins with a very significant statement. In the common translation many of us have heard, know, and read, it says, "There is a direct way. There is a direct path." The word for direct path is *ekayāna*.

In the early English translations, they translated it as "there is one way," which is a little bit frightening to say. But it turns out that this word, *ekayāna*, at the beginning of these instructions in mindfulness, even before the time of the Buddha in India, and seemingly in how the early Buddhist tradition understood it, refers to the confluence of a river where two

rivers come together and meet. And so there is this confluence. There's this coming together. There's things going together.

Āyana means to go, or to come to go together. So there is this unification, this joining. It's a very evocative idea. It's very different than, "There's the direct way." There is this coming together that happens of two streams, multiple streams, that becomes one larger stream.

And generally, when two rivers join, the larger one, the bigger one, sometimes it is more peaceful, is more settled, flows with a—because it has more space—flows in a more harmonious way. And so, what are these streams that are coming together for this text? There's different interpretations for that, and I'll offer maybe some later. But what I'd like to suggest now is that the idea of streams, rivers—the stream of the present moment, the streams, the currents within our own life, within ourselves—there's a current, the flow of sensations in your body.

Rather than being fixed, stationary, unmoving sensations, sensations shift and change and oscillate and come and go. There's a stream of sensations. There's the river, the stream of different sensations that come into play as you breathe. And to see them as streams is to emphasize how they're shifting and changing and kind of moving in breathings, maybe a cyclical movement somewhere in your body.

There might be streams of other sensations. There might be streams of a very subtle sense of vibration or a hum, background, kind of subtle vibration or hum that is a stream within you. Occasionally, we might even feel the stream of our blood moving through our veins. There's the streams of attention. We certainly can get fixated on certain ideas and thoughts and feelings, so the attention feels stuck.

Something feels stuck. But even there, if you pay careful attention, you'll see that awareness shifts and changes. Sometimes there's a stream of hearing sounds, stream implying that it's shifting and changing, coming and going. It's the change that's being emphasized in the stream. Sometimes it's this changing sensations of how we see.

Our eyes shift and look around, and we see different things. It's not just the changing sights, but there's also the way that the eyes gently, relaxedly shift and move and change. Maybe while you're eating, there's a stream of taste that comes and goes. Certain tastes linger for a while and fade.

For sitting meditation, *Vipassanā* practice often emphasizes the stream of physical sensations—the comings and goings, the shifting and changing of particular parts of your body that are sensations in them—and there's shifts and changing ways in which we know it.

We're mindful. Sometimes we're with the sensations themselves, feeling them in the body. Sometimes, with the knowing, the recognizing of what the sensations are.

And this act of sensing and feeling, sensing and knowing, is always in the present moment. It keeps us here in the stream of time. In the stream of present-moment time, there's no past and future. There's just the endless flowing of now, and all the ways that now is known, felt, experienced. So this confluence of streams, and one way of understanding that there is this meeting place, coming together of the streams of sensations, streams of things you experience in the present, and the awareness of that—how we know it, how we feel it.

Some of you have listened to my 7 a.m. teachings in the morning, the guided meditation, and you know that I often emphasize, when you first sit down, with the exhale, to relax different parts of your body, relax your mind, thinking mind. For today, I'd like to suggest something different. Don't relax anything in your body, in your mind, except one thing: relax how you feel it. Relax how you know it.

Let the stream of knowing, stream of awareness, the stream of mindfulness, as you're mindful of something, let the mindfulness of whatever is happening relax. It's kind of like you're floating down a river, and then you might try to grab onto the water so you don't drown. You might kick and scream, and you might tense up in the water. But you also, as you float, you might realize you float better if you lay flat on the surface, best you can, and relax.

You don't have to relax the river. You relax how you float in it. So there's a stream of sensations, a stream of the present moment. That's the location for mindfulness. This is the river we're floating in, and you want to float well and relax.

How you feel it, the act of feeling, relax that. Don't try to change what you feel. Relax around it. Settle into that stream of sensations, and let the sensations take care of themselves. If you know, just let the knowing be calm, relaxed.

Don't try to change what you know. Know in a softer way, so that the stream, the ongoing movement of knowing, feeling, being aware, feels satisfying. Feels nice and welcoming, even if what you know is painful. How you know it is not. How you know it is a place where you soften, relax, and maybe you don't have to change anything.

Nothing has to be different. By relaxing your knowing, relaxing how you feel, it respects what's happening without needing to change it. And allows it to unfold in its natural way. Everything is a stream. Relax your mindfulness, so you float in the stream of life, the stream of your lived experience.

Okay. So the metaphor of streams is used a lot in the teachings of the Buddha. One of the

interesting ones is that if there's a river or large stream, and farmers build canals, channels on the edges or sides of it so the water flows into the fields to irrigate the fields, if there's enough of those irrigation channels built, the river, the stream dries out. All the water's diverted.

And the Buddha uses this idea as a metaphor for the hindrances. The hindrances are the channels, the canals that pull the stream of life, of attention, and make it disappear, so that this being flowing onward in the stream of the present moment dries out. And then he has to come back and be in that stream. The stream-enterer. It's a powerful metaphor, the stream of the present moment.

And it might be useful to think of it. There's many streams here in the present moment, and the two which can be emphasized are a stream of the body, the flow of sensations, the river of sensations in the body, and the body is always in the present moment. Any kind of way, it has no choice. The mind has streams as well.

Streams of thoughts, sometimes called trains of thoughts, are the domain of hindrances. And their thoughts, the mind may or may not be in the present moment. Often, it's not. The thoughts and preoccupations and channels that we get lost in could be the past. Could be the future.

Could be about the present moment, but completely disconnected from the present moment, so caught up in thinking about it. And the task is this confluence, this coming together of two streams, so they work together: the body and the mind. And the remarkable thing about when the body and mind come together is that it's not just an incidental thing. It makes us complete.

It brings the whole together, the full operation of our wisdom, the wisdom within, the complete completeness of who we are, and how it all works together. It works better if the mind and body are united. And the only way they can be united is if the mind comes into the present moment. And the bridge, in a sense, or the connection between them that's really rich, is our capacity to be aware, to know, to sense and feel.

And so these streams are what we're navigating, floating in, in this practice. And we don't want to block any streams. We don't want to freeze any of the water. We don't want to empty the streams by these canals. We want to keep the water flowing.

We want to stay in the flow, in the stream, in the currents. And one of the things I'd like to emphasize, as I did before, is maybe you don't have to try to—unless it's obviously a good idea—you don't have to change anything. So if you're tense, if you have tension in your shoulders, it might be tempting to try to relax it. Of course, you can.

But there's something else you could do instead. Relax the awareness that knows you're tense. Relax the way you feel it, the way you know it. And it's not so—there's maybe a little bit ambiguous how that is done. But part of it is maybe just like giving room and space for the sensation to be there.

Part of it is that when we know things, sometimes we feel things. We don't know and feel innocently. What comes along is a lot of baggage. And so we might be mindful of what's happening. But mindfulness is a duty.

Mindfulness is trying to get something done. Mindfulness is striving to make a change. Mindfulness is to attain. Mindfulness is to avoid and make something go away. If I just really bring my attention carefully, this pain will go away.

Mindfulness comes with certain kinds of identification. I need to be a good practitioner, and this is what a good practitioner does. And I'm supposed to be continuous, so I need to bear down and be the one who's applying myself here. And there's all this extra that gets piled on. It's kind of like eventually enough debris falls into the river; it gets clogged.

The water doesn't flow anymore. So to relax that, to simplify the awareness, that's the task here, not to change anything except how you're aware. And one of the goals of this practice that I hope that you'll take seriously is to be aware in a way that is satisfying for you, to know in a way that you never regret that moment of knowing. To sense something, to feel something, you never regret having felt it, even if it's painful.

The way that you know feels so good. Wow, it's kind of like you're somehow distressed, and a friend ever so gently, kindly puts their hand on your shoulder, and it just feels so good to be accompanied. Ah, this is good. Friend doesn't seem to want anything or try to make anything happen. It's just, "I'm here. I'm here with you, very gently."

And you never regret that contact was made. So is there a way of discovering, more than you know maybe already, a way to be mindful so you'll never regret that moment of mindfulness? You look back at the moment before: yeah, that was good. That felt nice to just be clear.

And one of the reasons that makes this possible is that a unique characteristic of human awareness—maybe other animals have it too, but what's really unique for us—is that we can know that we know. We can know that we're aware, and that's where the magic is. That's where something—I mean—that's kind of amazing. It's kind of like an amazing phenomenon that it should even exist.

And that also, the knowing or awareness only happens in the present. And you might know that your awareness is burdened by a lot of shoulds and a lot of extra efforts, judgments,

and you're trying to measure and navigate and accomplish, and, you know, trying to be, you know, do all the doings that you somehow accumulated from listening to teachers like me too much. And so simplify. Relax how you know. Relax how you feel.

And in doing that, you're allowing the stream of life to flow in the way it flows. It wants to flow. It's kind of like getting out of the way. In a certain way, life knows the way forward more than you do. The *Dharma* knows what's supposed to happen more than you do.

So, to bring this into walking meditation, one way to do this that I like doing is, when you start doing walking meditation, to begin by imagining your awareness, your field of awareness, your consciousness, really wide. And I do this for myself. I imagine I'm a passenger in a car rather than a driver, and I'm sitting kind of like I'm sitting back, even though I'm walking. Sitting back, and all the world is coming towards me.

You can kind of imagine that in the car, even though the car is going forward, it's all coming towards you, towards you. So the world's coming towards me, coming into awareness, and I'm just receiving it, letting it come, come, receive, receive. And then when that sense of awareness is kind of established a little bit more in a relaxed, open, receptive way, I drop it down into the body. And then receive, allow the sensations, the stream of sensations that come in the body as I walk.

The constantly shifting and changing little micro-muscles and weights and adjustments that the body naturally does as you walk—it's a fascinating stream of sensations. Drop into it, rest in it, flow with it. Sometimes it's nice to do it really down by the feet and the lower legs, just there to keep it simple. So enjoy all this.