

Wednesday Dharma talk, week 4

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So we have been on a journey together. Thank you that we're doing this, and I'm aware that we're approaching the end. Maybe some of you are aware of that. If you're not, it's time.

And thinking about, you know, some way of what can follow the talks I've given so far, the place we're at at the retreat, I want to share that many years ago, someone asked me to say a few words. What were the most important things I've learned, or the most important outcome from all these years of practice that I've done? And I had five words: trust, awareness, and love everyone. Maybe it seems like a small thing, you know, five words after—that's one word for every ten years I've practiced. Should I maybe come up with something better, longer? I think that's how I feel.

I think that's quite profound, if I was going to really describe how I've been changed. And so, the awareness that we can trust—what is that awareness? I think it has a clarity to it. I think it has no suffering in it. It may be hard to define what it is. Maybe it's better not to. But maybe it's sometimes easier to talk about what it's not.

It's not awareness that clings to things. It's not clinging to our opinions, our stories, our identities, or to our complaints. I think that if you're an ordinary human being—I think you all qualify—there is a lot to complain about. I mean, if you like complaining, be a human. But it doesn't really serve us. An awareness that's used to find all the complaints, all the challenges, everything that's wrong, is not the awareness we trust.

Awareness that we trust is not selective. It doesn't use some things to be aware of against other things. I think one of the remarkable things that I received from *vipassanā* and *vipassanā* practice was that we find our grounding, we find our peace, we find our freedom with whatever awareness lands on. We don't have to turn away from something to find our grounding and grounding in reality. We don't have to make a different reality. The

awareness we trust means we trust being aware of anything that's humanly possible to experience.

And that stood out to me, that I learned that in *vipassanā*, because when I did Zen practice, it was very nice for me. When I started it, I had this reference point to give my thinking mind complete freedom. I know that's not what's supposed to be taught. That's how I brought that with me. I didn't learn it from Zen, but I gave my thinking mind complete freedom to think.

And in Zen, what I did was: every in-breath and every out-breath was my grounding in reality. So it wasn't that I had unfettered freedom to think whatever my mind wants to do, and it wasn't that I had to let go of anything. I gave my mind freedom to think, and I didn't see a problem with it. But it wasn't going to go wandering off, because every in-breath and every out-breath, I was here. I was here, present, and that was just a wonderful combination for me, to have that ease and peace in the mind to do what it did. And what happened was, the mind got quieter with that freedom; it didn't have to think so much after all.

And then when I came to *vipassanā*, what I learned is I didn't have to use only the breath as the grounding in reality. I could use anything that awareness landed on. And that's what we were told. We were told—we weren't told to do it that way—we were told that in anything that arises, that's predominant, that was the subject of mindfulness. There was nothing to turn away from or to fix or to avoid, or that didn't count. If it came into awareness, it counted as a place to ground.

And to trust this grounding ability, this finding freedom in each and every thing that comes up, was quite a wonderful way of, in a certain kind of way, affirming this life. Being willing to be present for this life, not needing to turn away from this life, but to be here in a full way. So I learned so many ways that the mind did do all those things. That's part of the journey.

And because in Zen it was so simple: just go back to the breath. Just go back to the breath. It taught me a lot about the simplicity of how to be with experience by just being simple with the breath and giving everything its freedom. And then, to be able to have the same with everything—no turning away from anything, but just be there with this, with this, open to everything.

And the difference between my previous life and the life that came slowly over practice was, it may be as dramatic as saying it was a life lived with my hand always in a fist, to discovering that the hand could be open. Now, it is possible to accomplish certain things with a fist. Half of those, at least, are not very healthy things to do. But an open hand can do so much more.

An open hand can touch this world, touch other people, with the most sensitive part of the hand. A fist doesn't do that.

An open hand is available to hold someone else's hand. It might be the earliest baby picture we have of my first son. It's a picture of his hand in my hand, because it was so small. Now, if I had placed it on top of my fist, I don't know if that would have made a nice photograph. So much more can happen with an open hand.

So if we live our minds, our hearts in a fist, our life is quite limited. To live a life of trust, trusting awareness, is trusting that we can be open: open mind, open heart. It's amazing. Trusting we don't have to defend. Maybe because we have nothing to defend or to believe. Trusting awareness is trusting that we can take better care of what happens when we're not tight and closed and afraid and preoccupied.

There's more intelligence available. There's more connectivity with others. More empathy. More. Just so much more is available. And what's remarkable, and maybe why it's frightening to trust awareness this way, is that there's not so much planning. There's not so much knowing ahead of time what's supposed to happen.

Trust awareness, and maybe we'll find out. So trusting awareness is not passive. I think we can act in the world much more effectively if we come out of this deep trust in the depth, the deep mind, the deep heart, responsivity to what goes on in the world. Probably a few of you have noticed, a little bit maybe accidentally, that I do a lot. So, if I'm supposed to be representative of trusting awareness, I guess it's not so passive.

But I seldom feel like I'm busy. Mostly when I have to go and deal with the admin stuff on the computer, that's a growing edge. But, you know, I feel like trusting awareness. So much of what I do comes out of that, and it's a lot easier to live life that way. I know what it's like to live a life that's stressed and to work a lot and be strained at what we're doing, but to do things without that strain, without stress.

And one of the surprises for me in doing this practice over these years is the way that this trusting awareness thing, trusting the practice, trusting being here and present, awakened kind of a greater sensitivity to other people. And it kind of took this form, that as that became clear, having a fist was not good, not helpful. One of the fists was a lot to do with me, myself, and mine. And that was a big challenge for me in the early years of practice. I was quite attached to all kinds of things with me, myself, and mine.

And I even saw the problem. I saw the delusion of it. I could feel like I needed to go, I should let go of it. But what did happen was, slowly, as I kept doing the practice, the fist of self slowly

opened. And a greater sensitivity arose to other people and their suffering, and their joys and their hearts.

And the less there seemed to be this fist of self, the less I was oriented around the word “I.” And also a little bit less around the word “you.” And what became more interesting, or more appropriate, or more kind of represented what was opening with these open hands, was probably more like “we.” There's a we. I don't want to say there's no duality between self and others. I don't want to say there's no unity.

But there is a sensitivity. There is care. There is compassion. There is loving-kindness. There is a profound caring. There is a feeling of being in it together.

We're accompanying each other in this journey of life. I find it as one of the marvelous mysteries to keep in mind when I see people, know people, pass people, strangers on the street. I don't know when I'm going to die. It could be relatively sudden. I could be far away from people I know. I could be near people I know.

But who is it? Who might be the last person to hold my hand? I was the first person to hold my son's hand. Who will be the last person to hold my hand? Might it be a stranger who comes to help? May it be my enemy.

I don't have any enemies, I don't think. But if I had one, would it be my enemy who would come over, at least when I'm dying? The person would at least put one hand under my shoulder and hold my hand. Who will hold my hand? Who's going to hold your hand? Who's going to care for you?

You might be very surprised when that time comes. It could be anyone that you pass in the street, anyone that you encounter. Even the people you least want to be there—it's all unknown. We're here to accompany each other, care for each other, see each other, be with each other.

So this idea for me, resting in awareness, resting, resting in awareness—that's sensitive, clear, and open. That has a cleanliness to it. That's attentive. That's available to be alert to this world. That's not preoccupied.

And a lot of this I learned from meditating, because that for me was a higher-quality place to trust awareness and have this deeper, available sensitivity to the world around me. And then maybe the fullness of that experience decreases outside of meditation, but it's, you know, learned there and then becomes a reference point. It becomes a possibility to accompany us to some degree as we go through the world, feeling people, knowing people, knowing ourselves, living in *saṅgha* with the whole world, living with a big we. We're all in it together.

So sometimes awareness is likened to a light. And earlier in the retreat, I read the passage that the Buddha was close to his last words—not as literally as last words, but near the end of his life—and he said, “Be a refuge unto yourself. Be an island unto yourself.” Well, the word for island in *Pāli* is *dīpa*, d-i-p-a. Which happens also to be the word for a flame, or a light, a candlelight, candle flame.

And sometimes it's been translated that way by translators: “Be a refuge unto yourself. Be a light unto yourself.” And some of you might know this, but the poet Mary Oliver wrote a poem where she uses “turnsides deeper as light.” The poem is called *The Buddha's Last Instruction*.

“Make of yourself a light,” said the Buddha before he died. I think of this every morning, as the east begins to tear off its many clouds of darkness, to send up the first signal—a white fan streaked with pink and violet, even green. An old man, he lay down between two *sāla* trees, and he might have said anything, knowing it was his final hour.

The light burns upward; it thickens and settles over the fields. Around him, villagers gathered and stretched forward to listen, even before the sun itself hangs, detached in the blue air. I am touched everywhere by its oceans of yellow waves. No doubt, he thought of everything that had happened in his difficult life.

And then I feel the sun itself as it blazes over the hills, like a million flowers on fire. Clearly, I'm not needed. Yet I feel myself turning into something of inexplicable value. Slowly, beneath the branches, the Buddha raised his head. He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd. Maybe saying, “Make of yourself a light.”

To look into the faces of your own frightened face and remember. To be a light unto yourself, an island unto yourself, a refuge unto yourself. And perhaps refuge and trust are the same thing. Trust awareness, trust refuge. If you trust refuge, the consequence is to be aware. That's the sanctuary.

And another person who maybe, someone who used this metaphor of light, was Martin Luther King. “Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can.” And Martin Luther King was a person who was phenomenally motivated to make this world a better place.

Near the beginning of his life, it was for the oppressed people in the United States. At the end of his life, it was for everyone. Why not love everyone? It'll be good for you. I don't know about them. How could it not be?

To trust awareness, so there's no fist, no fist in how you present for the world, no fist in how you're with other people. To trust awareness, so you know to be with suffering in a way that you don't suffer more, in a way that it does you good. Not because you're suffering better, but you're learning to hold the suffering better. You're not turning away, not making it more than it is, not complaining, and not afraid.

To trust awareness doesn't mean trust suffering. It means trusting being present in a simple, open, clear way that does you good. To love everyone doesn't mean that you're never going to be challenged by people anymore. That social life is not going to be complicated, difficult, maybe an impossible puzzle to figure out. But it means that you're never going to close your heart to anyone. Never turn your back on anyone.

Even though sometimes you should take a few steps back, you don't turn your back on them. Sometimes you have to take a few thousand steps back, but you never turn your back. Metaphorically. But you can't do that, of course, because then they get away with how they are. They get rewarded for being difficult, and I shouldn't, you know, love them.

Then the reason to love everyone—it's good for you. The alternative is worse for you. Why close yourself down? Why shut love down? Why diminish yourself that way? Why live in those thoughts that undermine your ability to be present and your ability to love?

What authority do you? Why do you give authority to these thoughts that seem so important? That obviously, very obviously, if you pay attention, doesn't do you any good. Limits you, undermines you, tells you stories that put you in the camp of those frightened people the Buddha was looking at when he said, "Be a light unto yourself."

So I certainly hope that this retreat has done you well. That it was good to be here and be on this journey and practice this way, both for you online and your way at home and all the challenges that might bring. And I hope the teachings I've offered have been meaningful and supportive and helpful for you as you find your way.

And some of it, maybe it was complicated for some of you. I mean, thirteen exercises, the five of this, the six of that, and the corpses. Give me a break. My hope is that whatever all that teaching was about, the practice here, my hope is that one way or the other, it brings you, leads you home to trust awareness more than you did before you came. Already, more than you were before, to love everyone.

I hope this practice allows us to go into the world, bringing our goodness with us. It's a frightened world. They could use people who are not frightened, who trust awareness and love. Thank you.