

Reflections of Daily Life

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As you know, most of us will be returning after a month of retreat. We'll be returning to a very different rhythm in our lives, and some of them will be very, very different. Some will be not that much different, depending on the conditions in our lives.

I want to start with something that reminded me. I've got my notes here being held up by this really beautiful little podium that was made by Bruce, and it's made out of a selfie stick. So it's the way he teaches, right? He was appreciating the challenges of *dukkha* in daily life, and he said to me, "One reason life is so difficult is because we spend the first nine months of our life in twenty-four-seven womb service."

I apologize for anyone whose English isn't fantastic. What we're really referring to is that the container of this retreat has really held us in a beautiful way. Whether we're here in person or online, the schedule has held us. The sitting, the walking, the regularity—all of us sitting together.

Those here tell me they feel all of you online. Those online get to see the wonderful backs of your heads, but they feel your practice. They feel the practice and are really aware. A lot of them are international right now, and just the *dhamma* spread throughout the world like this—it's such a wonderful feeling.

It's been part of our supportive container: our work meditations, our practice discussions, all these things. The sitting, walking, and those who served the delicious food have really been part of the container. When we go back to our daily lives, what is our container like? Is there anything that would make it a little more supportive? Is there any little thing?

Some people after retreat go, "I'm going to change my whole life. I'm going to do this." Let's not make any changes for another month. Don't decide you're selling your home. Just wait a little while until things integrate a little more.

But at some point, take some time to reflect on whether there's anything in the container of your life that might be more supportive. *Kalyāṇamitta*, *saṅgha* friends, maybe sitting with a group. Maybe having a little bit of a different way you start your sittings. There are so many different ways that can support a container.

But just as much as what we may add, is there anything we could let go of? Any little thing we can let go of to support our container? One of the things that I let go of is looking at the news so much. I made a commitment in my life: okay, what would I rather do? Sit in a wholesome field of love, or read for the fifth time the terrible things happening somewhere?

It's not that we want to be uneducated, but there's also a real balance. Sometimes it's just reducing what we do there and increasing how much time we spend in loving support of our lives.

One of the things that surprised me was my first month-long retreat. I remember coming home, and I was really in a good mood in the morning. I woke up, got dressed, went over to the kitchen, and stood there waiting to eat breakfast. It's amazing: it seemed like a really long time before it kicked in that I had to make it myself.

As we think about going home, so much of our life feels really extraordinary in retreat. Even the ordinary things in retreat somehow take on a specialness. Our presence is so strong when we're in this amazing container of retreat. So much in our daily lives can be so ordinary.

We're walking to another room. We're making breakfast. We're walking to the store, driving somewhere, picking up the phone—all these different things we do in our lives. Then we have our events: "I'm going here today. I'm calling this person."

We tend to see, "Oh, those are the events, and the other things are placeholders until we get to the good stuff." It can be a real deep mental habit of discounting those ordinary moments. It's really in the ordinary moments that the *dhamma* lives. The practice in daily life is really about being on the whole path.

The path isn't just meditation; it's the whole thing. It shows up in all those little moments in between. The difference is carrying affection, carrying attention: affectionate attention. That's what Ajahn Sumedho calls it: affectionate attention.

Just a little bit of kind caring shows up in the way we do something for someone, or the way we take out the trash. Do you take out the trash with kindness, with sweetness? Can you do that, or is it just something you're trying to get out of the way? Can we give the world, the life around us, affectionate attention?

Let me find it. There's a quote by John O'Donohue. He's an Irish poet, and I should get John to read it. He does accents really well, but it'll have to be in my voice.

"When love flows in the tiniest of details, the mundane becomes holy. Suddenly, everything matters because everything can evoke the sacred."

I'll read that one more time. "When love flows in the tiniest of details, the mundane becomes holy. Suddenly, everything matters because everything can evoke the sacred—the sacred absence."

When we express love as affectionate attention, we don't need to think of it as this large, grand, universal love. It's just a very simple love, the simple care, the simple affection for life. When we think of it in terms of the *satipaṭṭhānas*, these four *satipaṭṭhānas*, that kind of care is what brings all four of them alive in our lives.

Those qualities don't just live on retreat as a meditation practice. Every one of those qualities is part of everything we do in our lives. One way of thinking of it is that there are four ways of knowing our lives, just knowing our lives as they unfold. There's the body.

That's easy to connect with during our days: being in this body. In everything we do, the body is always here and always brings us here. And not doing it correctly. One of the things that's fascinating to me is how deeply embedded in us is the idea that there's a correct way to pay attention, that there's a correct way to be in this world, that there's a correct way to meditate.

There's this one little correct way, and we just have to get it exactly right. But however we experience, that's where the *dhmma* lives. It's what's here. It's what we see right now, how we see.

When I see this, I see a stick. Bruce saw it. Bruce saw this. We see different things. Each one of us has a different experience.

Now, we can notice every one of the *satipaṭṭhānas* in our daily lives, right? If we're having an unpleasant conversation, it's easy to feel that unpleasant *vedanā*. If we wake up in the morning to the sound of a chainsaw going next door, that might be an unpleasant mental state. Or maybe aversive mind, aversive mind state, arises—the hindrance of aversion.

Maybe we're out in the yard gardening. The joy from the sunflowers is right there, just this joyful feeling in the garden. Friendliness while we're waiting in line at the store. Everywhere we go, everything we do, these qualities are right there. It's just a matter of seeing them, noticing them, nourishing them.

Finding equanimity is a huge part of it. When we don't get what we want, is equanimity available? Or when we get what we don't want? It's close. It's close.

In a way, when we learn to recognize what's happening at any given moment—not even in meditation; it doesn't have to be meditation—we can easily see the process of sensing something. Something feels pleasant or unpleasant. The mind reacts. Craving and clinging might arise. *Dukkha*: there we are, just a cycle, just like that, throughout our day.

Maybe a thousand times a day, sometimes that happens. How do we meet that? Do we meet that with kindness? Just by seeing it, we discontinue the cycle. It doesn't matter when we notice it. The moment we see it, we're discontinuing it. We're not feeding it anymore.

I was in the middle of an argument shortly after retreat. I was really attached to my view, and I was arguing with my husband, of course. Somewhere in the middle of beginning to feel outrage at what he was saying, it just kicked in. I just noticed my clinging at that moment, and I saw it. It was just so clear.

There was a part of me that wanted to finish the argument. "Well, I'll let it go after. I've got to make this point." But the practice kind of guided me, and I stopped. I stopped right there.

It's an abrupt stop. All this flow is there. But what was really, really special for me was that after I saw it, stopped, and discontinued the cycle for myself, I was kind to myself. That was new for me. It was really new for me.

It's not that I didn't get caught, but I didn't get caught again by hating myself for getting caught. That's a huge part of this, of the way. If we're kind to ourselves every time we get caught, how much more likely are we to see it? Right at the other end of that, there's someone nice. Okay, I'm willing to look.

Now, the other thing I want to talk about is flexibility of mind. One way to consider flexibility is a renunciation of control. But what's interesting is that we're renouncing a control that we actually don't have. So it's more like the renunciation of the idea of control, the craving for control, the desire for control.

It's so easy to live with a delusion. I keep going back over and over again to this illusion that if I just get things right, everything will be good. I just have to get things right. If I do this, this, and this, then everything will be all right.

But we can't control what happens. Even if we know better, we still do that sometimes. If you think about this retreat, we've done so much over the years that we've been doing this. All the volunteers—at least half of them are sitting in the room—have made this happen with

so much care, trying to get our processes right and get all these things just the way we want them, to make it really, really smooth.

And things happen. I think Shelley just went in a few minutes ago to get things ready for the computer for donations. Where's the computer? It wasn't there. I still don't know what happened, but things happen in this environment.

Now, maybe—I don't know how many of you were woken about a week ago—the fire alarm went off in the middle of the night. I don't know, maybe three o'clock or so. Unfortunately, it wasn't the screeching, loud, deafening one that wakes the dead. It was the pleasant-enough one that just wakes everybody who's sleeping nearby. It happened two nights in a row, for those of you here who didn't notice.

So we planned, and we have a great fire system that misfires sometimes. Then we had quite a few job changes, trying to meet all these thirty-one parts of the body that needed rest. Jobs changed, and things happen. We worked around it; we adapt.

Nothing is stationary. Every time we try to get everything neatly arranged—well, you probably have a room in the house that once was neat for one minute, and then very soon it's no longer neat. It's all changing. Those of you online are probably really aware of when the internet went down in the beginning of Gil's *Dharma* talk. How did you meet that?

You're all ready for this inspiring talk, and the internet's gone. So I'm going to read a quote that I kept on my fridge probably for a decade. I kept it there until I stopped reading it and started ignoring it every time I walked by, so I took it off at that point. Tenzin Palmo was a nun who spent twelve years living in a cave. I think she's still alive and teaching, as far as I know.

The reason we're not enlightened is because we don't bother to bring ourselves to the present. We're too fascinated by the games the mind is playing. Genuine renunciation is giving up our fond thoughts, our delighted memories, thoughts about the future, day-dreams, or mental chatter. To renounce that and stay naked in the present—that's renunciation.

The part I left out, by the way, was how easy it is to renounce the things of this world, like relationships and family. I figured we didn't need to say that. But it points to another part of flexibility, a really important part of flexibility: the ability to set things down.

At the beginning of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, we're setting down our desire and distress with the world. Even just coming here, we set aside our projects or plans. At least physically, we

set them aside, and we did our best to mentally set them aside. So we know how to set things down. We know how to intentionally set things down.

We're not necessarily in the habit of setting them down. One of the practices that I took on many years ago was really instrumental for me in my daily-life practice. It helped me begin to bridge what I was developing on retreats with my sitting practice every day and my study. But there was something where I still felt like, "Oh, this is my real *dhamma* time. Okay, now this is my daily *dhamma* time."

I was still separating out *dhamma* and everything else. I wasn't thinking of it that way. I came home from a long retreat, and I had all this computer work to do. It was a project I had to do, and it was hours and hours and hours on the computer.

I was coming from this really ultra-relaxed, mellow state, and it was amazing when I noticed how tight I got. When I noticed that, I kind of ignored it because I was still thinking about my project and getting it done. I started walking to the kitchen, and mindfulness of walking kicked in just from the momentum of the retreat. I went, "Whoa."

It became so real, the difference between this mind that was frantic and trying to get things done and stressed, and the mind that was just settling in my feet and walking to the kitchen. So I made a commitment to myself to aim that every time I got up from sitting, I would do walking meditation wherever I went next. Not just on retreat, but throughout my life.

I do most of my computer work in this office. I don't walk far to my bathroom or to the kitchen. But I started to, every time. I slowed it down so I could consciously set down my project.

The most fascinating part was being willing to let go of my attachment to thinking about it. It's not that I did so much productive work while I walked to the kitchen. But the attachment was really strong, sometimes desperate. Sometimes the clinging was so, "No, no, I can't set that down."

What was amazing when I did that was that I'd come back, my body would be relaxed, I'd be refreshed, and I'd actually get more done because my mind was much clearer. It allowed me to begin to find a rhythm where the stress just didn't build. By the end of the day, I wouldn't say, "Oh God, I feel like I need a massage now." But that would always be nice, though.

So, intentionally putting aside what is needed. One of the things that became really obvious to me—and I don't know how many of you share this—was that I discovered I was confusing anxiety and motivation. I was using stress. I believed that stress was what would give me energy and get me going.

I needed stress. It was a little like last-minute cramming in school. I would wait until I really needed to, had no other options, and cram. I'd drink five cups of coffee, get really, really tight, and use all that cortisol, all those hormones in my body.

Yes, they gave me energy. For a really long time, I found that it was so deep in me that energy came from being tight. To begin to trust awareness, to trust that awareness allows the energy to flow—the energy is a lot smoother. It's a kinder energy, and it's more fun too.

Now, the other piece that I noticed was appreciating—I started appreciating—the wonders of thinking. Really, how wonderful thinking actually is. What an amazing tool we have to think. But like any tool, we want to use it well.

You either hurt someone with a knife, or you cut up the food. Same thing with thinking. I started viewing thinking as internal speech. That's been a really rich practice for me, to stay with that awareness of internal speech.

For years, I practiced with right speech, trying to keep very close to me the four questions about right speech: Is it true? Is it useful? Is it timely? Is it kind?

So when something's off, what's happening here? My thinking feels tight. My thinking feels sticky. What's going on here?

Often, it's not kind. Or often, when you're planning something for the hundredth time in meditation, it's not the right time, right? It's not timely to think about it now. There's an acronym. I'm trying to remember the order.

I love acronyms. Some of them are really cool, and they're really catchy and stay in your mind. Trying to find one for that really took some time. I came up with TU KT, like being tucked into bed: true, useful, kind, timely. If that's helpful for you, I like that.

As we're ending the retreat, one of the things that I've done all my years of retreat after my first one is plan what I'm going to do at the end of the retreat. I try to have a gradual reentry into my daily cycle instead of going to work the next day. I always very carefully plan the retreats, and occasionally the plan worked out.

But there was one in particular that struck me. It was toward the end of a four-month retreat, and it was a self-retreat at home. I was doing it with my husband, and we were really fortunate that we could do the whole retreat. We had local produce delivery, so we never had to even go online. They just dropped it off every week, and we didn't have to do anything.

It was really great. We were pretty quiet. It was near the end, and we were really settled. We didn't even talk to our dog. But he was okay, as long as he stayed on my lap or Bruce's lap.

Then we got a knock at the door, an insistent knock at the door. Very insistent. Okay, maybe we can't ignore this one. We went to the door, and there were two police officers standing there.

One of them said, "We need to go into your backyard because the neighbor behind you is threatening his family with a gun. We want to peek over the fence so we can know what's happening from this end of the house. We've got two more people at the front of the house."

I think it took us a little too long to welcome them in. But we did. We sat there very mindfully, watching, observing these two officers with their guns drawn, peeking over a fence. One was a little bit short, so they were on a stool, on a ladder.

I have no idea how long it was. We were just watching, watching. Then they came down, came around, and said it had been resolved, and left. So we thought, okay, just go back to the retreat.

We sat down, thinking we were going to meditate, and we both just sat there. At first, it took us about thirty seconds. Then we both started laughing. I don't remember anything else about the retreat—I mean, about the end of the retreat, that is.

But you know what? I still plan a gentle way to end my retreats. I still do that every retreat. So yeah, that's what I had for now.

I'm going to end with a poem. I know some of you know this poet, Rosemary Watola Trommer, and it's called *The Medicine of Surrender*.

The Medicine of Surrender comes with no spoonful of sugar, no promises, no backup plans, no returns, no insurance. The medicine of surrender never tastes the way you expect, never tastes the same next time. Seldom has a hope for effect. And if there was some part of you that thought it might not be affected, that thought it might hold back, that part of you is most likely the part to be flooded with the relentless truth of what is.

Oh, surrender—the surest medicine that exists. There are infinite side effects: wonder, freedom, rawness. It's like opening the dictionary to the word heaven, or obliteration, and knowing it's the same thing. It's like playing spin the bottle with life, and you French kiss whatever you get. It's the only remedy that can help you be whole. The only medicine there is.

Thank you. Let's sit a little bit.