

## Accepting the Mind (Discovering Ikigai)

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Just want to check the sound. How is that? You can hear? Okay, let me know. Okay.

Well, it's nice for me to be back here, and it feels like a little bit of a homecoming. I haven't been here in a while. I've been a member of this community, a practitioner, since the late '90s. I can't believe it myself. Something like 20 years or more—25 years—and every time I come here, I still remember the first time I came to IMC, when we were meeting at the Quaker Friends Meeting House in Palo Alto. I don't know if anyone remembers that.

There can be a kind of magic in being a beginner, and the first time you do something. I was just talking to someone here who's kind of here for the—I don't know if there's anyone else here for the first time, or meditating for the first time. Yeah, and in Buddhism, beginner's mind is a wonderful thing. It's when we're totally open. Something is new and fresh, and full of possibility, and we kind of have an innocence or purity.

If you've done this a lot, or done anything a lot, it's kind of like, "Oh, I know what's going to happen," right? I'm going to sit down. I mean, I feel it myself. It's like I look at my cushion at home, and I'm like, "Well, I know what's going to happen. I'm going to go sit down and breathe for a while, and then get up," right? I think it's a very natural thing, a very human thing, to think we know something. We want a kind of certainty or predictability.

Part of the power and the beauty of a practice like this is that we are opening to what's unknown and what's uncertain. Who knows what's going to happen? We don't know what our mind is going to serve up to us. What's going to—you know? To sit down and have this practice of moment to moment, just being with this mind, this body, this heart—it's so simple. It's so simple, but I think it's also a beautiful thing, a deep thing, and I'm always surprised by the experience of sitting.

So, to this person who's new here today, I gave my very brief beginner's instruction, which is just two words: accept everything. Whatever happens, whatever comes in—we're not trying to create some particular experience. Not even calm, not even peace, not even enlightenment. We're here to just accept this moment as it is, moment to moment, things as they are, life as it is. And then, in doing that, this kind of *dharma* field develops.

This *dharma* field little by little expands—maybe expands—and can hold what's here, can hold what arises in consciousness. So, it's a great thing to be a beginner, and we envy you.

One of the reasons it's nice for me to be back is having been—you know, I started sitting with this group in the late '90s, and then began teaching around 2013 or so. Then, when COVID happened, I got the idea, or the little inspiration, that I wanted to expand my own understanding of Western psychology. So I went to grad school to train in psychotherapy, and I just finished that. Now I feel a little more space and time to kind of be here. One of my interests is the intersection of Eastern thought and Buddhism, and Western psychology and psychotherapy, psychoanalytic thinking. So anyway, just a warning: you might hear something.

The other way I feel like I'm back, or I'm home, is that I was just in Asia for about six weeks—in Japan, and then also a little bit in Thailand and Cambodia. So maybe I'll talk about that a little bit.

One of the ways my own understanding of meditation has changed or evolved is this shift from trying to get something, or trying to use meditation. Meditation is powerful. It can be a great tool for things. I used it to sort of get my mind the way I want it to be. I want to have less of this and this and this, and more of this and this and this. And that's okay.

But now I feel this kind of reverence for, as he was saying, this attitude of acceptance. It's not only accepting what arises, but seeing the contents of our mind as something valuable for us. The things we think about, the patterns of thought, the images that come up in meditation, the memories that come up, the concerns, the anxieties, the dreams, the hopes—these are kind of like our treasures in a way. Personally, I think it's a mistake to dismiss, “Oh, that's just thinking,” or, “That's just imagining or dreaming,” or something. This is so valuable.

Freud talked about dreams as the royal road to the unconscious. I'm not such a popular guy these days, but he talked about dreams as the royal road to the unconscious. There's one way to think of what we dream about when we're sleeping: it's just random static, right? It's just the detritus of our brain secretions. Maybe it's totally random, but maybe our dreams, in some way, reflect our inner life and our inner state. Maybe there's a place for looking at that

and finding insight in that.

So I think when we meditate, it's like letting ourselves be bored, letting ourselves be agitated, letting ourselves have this experience of the mind wandering. I was giving a talk at a kind of vocational school in Cambodia, where this nonprofit that I admire and support has all these different training programs, builds schools, and does all these things. One of the things I get a little surprised myself in saying is that it's so valuable to be bored. These days, I feel it myself: when I have a moment when nothing's really going on, my hand just goes where I keep my phone. I take out my phone. There's probably something good there, something interesting.

So less and less these days do we have this experience of simply being with ourselves in an uncomplicated way. I remember some years ago—maybe it was like 10 years ago—I happened to be in Tokyo with my *Zen* teacher. Some of you may have known Mel Weitzman from the Berkeley Zen Center. We were in Tokyo, and we happened to be riding on the subway.

When I first came to Japan, I was amazed because the subways are so quiet. I'm from New York City, and there's a little more activity in a subway car—screaming and singing. It was so quiet. Then I was like, "What is everyone doing, this quiet?" When I first went to Japan, probably 2002 or 2003, it was before the iPhone. Everyone was reading.

They had these little books, and I think the way Japanese language is, you can kind of say a lot in a few characters. So the books are really kind of small, and everyone seemed to be reading these little books. What I thought was interesting was that everyone had this kind of book cover on, so you couldn't see what the other person was reading, right? It was a little private thing, or privacy.

Then, in this memory of being with Mel about 10 years ago, people had iPhones. It was like every single person was looking at their phone, doing something, except for one person: Mel, my *Zen* teacher. He was kind of just sitting there, looking around, looking at people, looking out the window. So I felt like, "Well, I can't take out my phone. I have to kind of be present," right? We weren't really talking that much, but it was such a wonderful teaching for me.

To have this time with ourselves and not need to fill it up with something, even if it's good, even if it's productive, even if there are all kinds of great things to read and see and research. Maybe one of the most valuable things about coming to a place like this and sitting down into this, just opening into the silence, into the stillness, is restoring some sense of balance. We're always out there. We're always engaged and immersed in, you could say, the object of consciousness. We're thinking about something, doing something, and we have some

agenda, which is fine, which is good.

But this is a chance to restore a little balance. What I find for myself is that it creates space. Usually, unless maybe you're an artist or something, and you're attuned to composition, like a visual artist, we don't notice the empty space in a room, right? Or the empty space on a page. But that's the source. That's the source of possibility. That's the source of renewal.

In meditation, we're training ourselves to let go of the fixation and the obsession with the objects and the stuff, and maybe relax a little bit into the empty space. When I feel this kind of spaciousness, sometimes there's room for different kinds of content to arise—different kinds of images, different kinds of dreams, different kinds of thoughts. Creativity and inspiration, I think, are often connected to this discipline of being still and being open and being present and accepting whatever shows up. Whatever shows up is *dharma*. Whatever shows up, we use it, we meet it.

In a way, it's a little bit like a dream state. We're in and out. We're not thinking about something in an intentional way, but things are coming and going, and thoughts are coming and going.

This nonprofit that was kind of hosting me in Thailand and Cambodia is called Child's Dream, Child's Dream Foundation. The theme of a dream, right? This organization was the dream, or the inspiration, of two men who were Swiss bankers about 20 years ago. They were doing banking in Asia, so they got to know, I think maybe based in Singapore and Hong Kong and these different places, a little bit of Southeast Asia and the Mekong Delta.

Thailand is a pretty developed country. There are definitely rural areas, but if you go to Bangkok, it's more advanced than San Francisco—the transit system and the high-rises. But then, expanding a little bit from Thailand, there's Burma, Myanmar, where there's a lot of conflict right now, and Cambodia and Laos. I was a little bit surprised to learn that these countries are about on the same level of the human happiness index, or the human development index, as the poorest countries in Africa. They're kind of like 158 out of 160 countries, or something. So there's a lot of poverty and a lot of need in these places.

These bankers—one was, I think, in his mid-20s, and one was in his mid-30s—said, “Okay, we've had this experience of managing the wealth of billionaires, and that's nice, but for our own sense of balance and meaning and purpose, we want to do something a little bit different.” So they started this educational nonprofit. The first donors were their former clients at the Swiss bank.

Part of the reason I know about this organization is that one of the things I do in the sum-

mers is bring university students, mostly from Japan, to Southeast Asia. It's a cross-cultural educational experience that comes out of, via—I don't know, you might know this wonderful organization called Volunteers in Asia. The founder of which was at Stanford for many years.

Anyway, in the process of finding different places for us to visit in Thailand, I found this non-profit. The students are so inspired by what they're doing. They're building schools in places like Cambodia. I think they've built like 300 schools. They also provide pathways for refugees from Myanmar.

Not to go into the whole situation, but you may know that there's a kind of civil war happening in Myanmar. So many people have walked out of the country and into Thailand because the border is kind of open. But then, if you're in Thailand, you have no papers, you have nothing. Thailand doesn't really want you. You don't have a passport from your country, and so it's a very vulnerable place to be.

Imagine you're a young person. Well, you can't go to Thai school. So what are you going to do? How do you go to school? An organization like this creates non-formal schools for these migrant populations and refugees. So all this amazing stuff is happening.

When I bring the university students to meet with the founders of this organization, part of it is to learn about what they're doing, to learn about the need there. But part of it is also to give these founders a chance to talk about their own life journey. I think when you're a young person, especially in a country like Japan—I think here too—there's a lot of pressure to follow a traditional path to something. To have an example of these guys, and there are many other examples, of course, who have followed that thought, followed that voice, is very meaningful.

I don't know if that thought came up while they were meditating. We could say it did for purposes of this talk. But at some point, they had this thought, right? Instead of just ignoring it, they kind of followed that thread. It's so inspiring for the college students.

When I was with one of the founders for a couple of weeks, just traveling around and visiting different sites and projects, I was amazed at the kind of passion and energy that he had. It was a great reminder for me. When we're fully engaged in something that we believe in—not only something that we think is the right thing to do, but that we're passionate about, that we're enjoying—it creates its own energy, right?

I'll just say a little bit more because I love this foundation so much. One of the things they do is they have something called the Children's Medical Fund, the Burma Children's Medical Fund.

What it does is bring children out of Burma who are sick. The medical system in Burma has pretty much collapsed, especially with the war that's going on now. But it was never great, never that developed.

Thailand has pretty much a first-world healthcare system. What this program does is bring out children who are sick, but they only deal with three conditions, which are congenital conditions that the children are born with. They bring them out of Burma and into Thailand, and arrange for them to get this life-saving surgery. The recovery takes months, so they support them in a kind of safe house in Chiang Mai, where they recover. Eventually, they can go back to their country. How amazing is this?

The way it's thought through and vetted is that it's not just taking anyone who's sick. They know that these conditions can be basically cured with the surgery. They have relationships with the surgeons and the hospitals in Thailand. I said, "Well, how do you even—Thailand, if you've been to Thailand, especially in this area of Thailand by the border with Burma, there's a lot of military, a lot of checkpoints. It's not like you can just—it's not like the EU, a kind of big zone, and you can just go anywhere. How do you get these children who have no papers and no documents and are not in the country legally, from the border all the way to Chiang Mai or Bangkok, where they can have the surgery?"

They said, "Oh, they know us—the military." This organization creates this kind of document, and volunteers drive them through. It's like a four-hour drive, with about three or four different checkpoints, and they just kind of wave them through. They see, "Oh, it's through Child's Dream, and they're doing this medical thing."

So it takes so many different supporters and people, and the goodwill of people. One of the places we visited was this safe house where the children go before surgery and after surgery. The woman who runs it is a nurse and has been doing it for 25 years.

I think, for me, it was a wonderful reminder that our practice is, maybe to have a full practice, a complete practice, a balanced practice, not just about what's happening on the cushion. It's not just about what's happening in our own internal experience. That's beautiful and important. But then it's like, what do we—how do we express what we see, what we feel? How do we let ourselves follow that thread of inspiration?

It will look different for each of us. One of the things that these nonprofit founders talk about with our college students is this concept of *ikigai*. Has anyone heard of that? This Japanese word, which, I think in the traditional sense, *ikigai* has this meaning of your purpose, your deep purpose in life. So to find your *ikigai* is a beautiful thing.

But the way they talk about *ikigai* is that they show this Venn diagram. It's the overlap of, "What do I love doing? What am I good at? What does the world need?" Then, in this model of it, "What will I get paid for? How can I support myself?" So it's the overlap of those three or four things that they talk about as *ikigai*. The students really like that.

But I think in order to know what our purpose is, in order to find our *ikigai*, we need these moments of stopping and being still and listening to ourselves in a deep way. Even though there can be a temptation, maybe, to use meditation as a strategy to create a mind state or an experience, that's okay. But when that doesn't work—if you can get calm, if you can get peaceful, great, go for it. But if your mind is anything like my mind, it doesn't really listen to me that much.

Then I would say this is when our real practice begins. It's letting go of that habit to control and to fix, and opening up to what's here and what's being offered, and to find the *dharma* in that, to find the beauty in that, to find the goodness, and follow that thread. It might even be like, "Oh, I should call so-and-so," or, "Oh, I should answer that email," or, "I should honor that voice."

From these two Swiss guys who had this idea, now it's this great—I think they might have 80 people working for them—amazing organization that's doing so much good in this part of the world that really needs it. But again, it's going to look different for everybody. So what are your gifts? What do you have to offer the world? Not only what you're good at, but what you enjoy, because it turns out when we enjoy something, we're more likely to do it.

We're going to do it more, and then the more we do it, the better we're going to be at it. So I feel like this practice is a portal into this deeper understanding of ourselves, this deeper meeting of ourselves. This is a great thing for us, and it can be a great thing for the world. I think maybe I'll stop here. See if anyone has a comment or question. What do you make of all this?

Have you heard of this? There's a term called AI slop. So much of the content that's online, or whatever, is all AI-generated now. I was thinking that we have to come back to our human slop. It's not really slop, actually. Anyway.

Thank you. Thank you for your lecture. Actually, that helped me because I struggle with the monkey mind. I've heard in other practices this idea of gently bringing the mind back, but you talked about acceptance even before that. I'm not sure what to do, because I bring it back for a few seconds and then off it goes again. So I like the idea of acceptance. It seems to make sense from a Buddhist perspective. But how should we practice, I guess, is the basic

question.

Yeah, thank you. It's a great question. Someone once said Suzuki *Rōshi* was a Japanese *Zen* teacher. He said something like, "If it's not paradoxical, it's not true."

So yes, we're coming back to this moment, and we have some wonderful supports in meditation for that. One is just the awareness of the body, right? Sensations of the body are happening in the moment. That's why posture is often emphasized, because to maintain an upright posture, we have to have some degree of awareness or presence. Or something like the sensations of breathing, another kind of body sensation, opening to sounds in the room—these are kind of touchstones in the present moment.

What I would say is that maybe, in a way, the skill of meditation or the craft of meditation is a little bit like learning to drive or ride a bike. It's like, "Should I steer, or should I—I mean, these days we don't have to shift so much—but should I steer, or should I deal with the pedals, or should I?" Well, yes, you've got to do it all, basically, right? And we learn. When I'm riding a bike, there's a certain kind of muscle memory.

At first, we're really wobbly, and it's like, "Okay, I just have to pedal and get some momentum." But then it's like, "Oh, I kind of have to steer and have to—" Then, at a certain point, it's like, "Okay, my body knows how to do this." So I kind of think about it like that.

But as we're starting off, I think to cultivate that fundamental attitude of acceptance is the most important thing. When we're trying to do something, we're a little bit in conflict with ourselves. I want to be here, I want to be present, but my mind is thinking about yesterday or tomorrow or whatever. So it creates this division. In meditation, the point is to have this kind of wholeness, this unity.

This fundamental disposition of acceptance lets our agendas—even our good agendas, like, "I want to be present, I want to be here"—quiet down a little bit. Then it turns out, when things are quiet, we're here. Where else could we be, right? The present moment is not something we need to work really hard to generate or fabricate or figure out. It's all there is. When we stop fighting with ourselves, that's all there is.

That's kind of how I see it. The other thing I just wanted to share is this image of, I don't know if anyone grew up in New York City—maybe there are other places—where you turn on the tap and the water, it's good water, but it's really cloudy. Anyone remember that? It's kind of almost white. You think, "Well, how can I get this water to be clear?"

Any amount of technique or stirring it or doing some different thing with it is not going to help. The only thing that works is to just leave it alone, right? Accept it. Let it be still. Once

it's still, all of that settles, and then it's clear. It's perfectly clear.

So I think a little bit like that. And yeah, being with the body is great. Being with the breath is great. To have some intention of that is very helpful.

This idea of meditating on something—is that a real thing, or is that just a colloquialism? Meditating on something, like the breath. People say they're going to meditate on something. Is that a thing?

Well, it depends what you mean by that. Traditionally, people will say meditate on the breath, right? You might say, like, look at a candle flame or something. So you can meditate on anything. All it means is you're choosing—you have this intention of what you're aware of.

What I'm saying is that's good, but despite whatever our intention is, we're going to have lots of other things that happen. It's not a mistake that those other things happen. That's valuable too, maybe even more valuable than the candle flame or the breath or something, right? It's easy, in a way, especially if you've gotten enamored with meditation, to use meditation as a way of avoiding. “Oh, I don't want to feel that feeling. I don't want to think about that.”

If you've been good at meditating on the breath, you can just block things out, right? That might be good. That might be useful at certain times. But basically, we want to be open and let things in, I think, and have the ability to meditate on, be aware of, whatever shows up, not just this one narrow thing.

Thanks. Hey, Max, I guess when you're talking about the *ikigai*, I see some students in college and stuff, they kind of focus more on the second and fourth one—mostly on the fourth one. It's like, “What can I make money at?” And then also, “What am I good at?” How would you talk to these young people that are trying to pick majors and stuff? Maybe you want to also consider what you enjoy doing, and also what will help people. I'd just be interested to see what you would say to kind of help them balance those four things out a little more.

Yeah. No, thank you. It's a great question. I think it's natural. It makes sense for someone who's young, who's at the start of their career, their professional life, to be thinking about how they can support themselves. So I think that's a good thing.

But let's say if that were the only thing that's in the picture, I think maybe it leaves out a lot. It's on this assumption that once I make this amount of money I want to make, then I'll be happy. So just that encouragement to bring in, like, yeah, what do I enjoy? What do I love doing? The thing about what we enjoy and what we're good at is a little fuzzy for me, because often we enjoy what we're good at—not always. Teasing those apart is a little tricky.

Some people have said that the advice, “Follow your passion,” is the worst career advice, or something. I’m never going to play in the NBA. I’m never going to be an opera singer. I can listen—I love opera, listen to it or something—but it’s not like—so, a little bit of reality.

But then I think it’s finding ways in. It might be meditation. It might be something else. It might be like the summer program that we do. The Japanese students have a roommate who’s from Myanmar, who’s from Burma. They’re both Asian countries, but they have very different circumstances, and they learn so much in this relationship and connection.

Yes, the Japanese students learn about Southeast Asia, but maybe even more crucially, they learn about themselves. To have experiences of getting out—I mean, I think it’s good for all of us to get out of our comfort zone, to travel, to meet different kinds of people, to do things like this. Then we’re starting to, little by little, see more of ourselves, and the picture kind of starts coming into focus.

The other thing that I say to the students is probably what you do over your long life is going to change. I started out doing humanities in college, and then I was in the tech world, and then doing Buddhism and meditation, and now psychotherapy. So not to feel like you’re going to be locked into one thing forever.

But it’s a great question. Maybe I’ll just use this to give a little plug for my Sunday night group here, which is meeting tonight, which is for people in their 20s and 30s. Often these questions are very alive. So anyway, thank you.

Okay, okay. Thank you very much. Take care.