

Dharma Practice as a Gradual Path to Becoming Whole In Ourselves

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Good morning, everyone, and welcome. Today, I'm planning to give a little bit of a shorter talk than usual so that I can leave. I have to be up in five hours, up into the Sierras by four o'clock or so, to begin a retreat up there that I'm teaching. So I can't linger here afterwards too much.

Oh, it's not loud enough. Let's see, is that getting louder now? Okay. And there are hearing assistance devices which help also. Well, so it kind of sounds like someone's hearing aid. Oh, someone's hearing aid is squeaking. Is that good now?

So, I think the simple point that I'd like to make in today's talk is that, in Buddhism, the path of mindfulness is part of a larger path of inner growth. You could call it spiritual growth, *dharma* growth. And the word “growth” is very apropos for this process, because it's a gradual process, gradual growth. It's a gradual unfolding development that happens over time, and it can happen one's whole life. It is just a slow, steady growing of all kinds of different inner qualities, characteristics, states of mind, and states of heart.

Some of these things that grow can grow to fill us. They can really come and shape our disposition, how we are in the world, who we are, and how we feel we are. And, in the tradition, they say they can come to a kind of wholeness with them, a fullness, a completion of these wonderful states. It is a slow and steady process.

When I was introduced to Buddhism, for many years I did not get that message. The one message I received was, “Don't look for any growth. Don't look to get any benefit from this. Just sit completely in the present moment. Meditate. Just be really right here and right here. Sit in the emptiness of all things, or sit with an awakened mind, kind of.” And that was just happily ever after.

So there was this radical, almost nondual idea: just be here with this. And the other thing that I saw in Buddhism was that there was a tremendous emphasis on enlightenment. Sometimes enlightenment was to be found right here and now, and sometimes it was, you know, you hoped to make it there someday. And so a lot of the emphasis was on enlightenment, and that enlightenment itself was a radical letting go, a radical falling away. In Zen, they call it a dropping of body and mind. In *Theravāda*, they sometimes call it a radical cessation.

But it's a radical letting go. And if you look for descriptions and definitions of what this experience of awakening is, they're very nondescriptive. There is nothing, very little, to hold onto there, almost maybe purposefully, so that you're not trying to get or acquire or select an experience that's just that experience. And so there was a little quip that people would say: "Enlightenment is not what you think it is." And so it doesn't matter what you're thinking, because it's not going to be that.

And, in fact, if you go back and look at the teachings of the Buddha, the experience of awakening that he describes, if it is described, is mostly a description of absence and what's not there. There is absence of attachment, absence of clinging. But it's almost like a very, very reluctant way to say what it is.

One of the things that was also emphasized over the years that I practiced was a great emphasis on not-self, no-self. It's kind of confusing, the whole idea of no-self, but that was emphasized. And so no-self means that, you know, I don't know what it means exactly, but you're not supposed to find anything that's yourself. And so then, you know, just be empty. Just realize the emptiness of all things, and that's it.

But there was a lot of emphasis on enlightenment, a lot of emphasis on letting go, and a lot of emphasis on the idea of no-self. Historically, the way that was presented was partly a modern selection, especially a Western choice about what to emphasize, what was really important. With the emphasis on letting go and emptiness and just enlightenment itself, there wasn't a recognition that the Buddha himself talked a lot about not what the experience of awakening is like, but how a person is transformed in the process of spiritual growth, the process of development. A person who is awakened is a transformed person. And that transformation can be described. That can be talked about in positive ways.

The teachings of no-self are kind of a deflection from that for some people. Like, you're not supposed to find anything about who you are. You're supposed to find out that you're not. And so any kind of transformation is not supposed to be emphasized or talked about much. Anyway, we're supposed to just let go.

And so they don't want to talk about what you gain in the process, because, you know, you're supposed to let go. So, the more I read and study the Buddha's teachings, and the more that I've done this practice for over fifty years now, I really appreciate the slow and gradual growth of inner qualities and inner capacities for all kinds of things. In the tradition, that's emphasized by a lot of wonderful vocabulary words that I just glossed over for years. My teachers never highlighted these words, and it didn't seem like they were important.

One of the ways that we first started seeing this was the word that, in English, is sometimes translated “endowed.” A person is endowed with certain characteristics and qualities. One of the things a person becomes endowed with as they mature in this practice is the *Eightfold Path*. Now, that was a little bit jarring for me to hear, because I was introduced to the *Eightfold Path* as being kind of like beginner practices in Buddhism.

That's just what you have to start with. You start with the *Eightfold Path*. You need to learn it and dutifully do it, and then get on to the real things: emptiness and enlightenment. But when the Buddha describes someone who has matured into an awakened state, matured in the way this practice matures, that person is described as being endowed with the *Eightfold Path*.

The person becomes the *Eightfold Path*. The person doesn't even practice it anymore. The *Eightfold Path* is so integrated into the very being that this is how they live their life. This is how they appear. This is who they are, in a sense.

They have right view, right intention, right speech, right action, and right livelihood. They have right effort. They have right mindfulness and right concentration. These are beautiful states.

Rather than seeing them as practices, which means a lot of huffing and puffing, at least at first they can be seen that way, see them instead not as practices to do, but as states that we acquire. As you mature in this practice, these are states that fill us. And the language, again, of this ancient tradition uses a lot of words of being filled, filled with the seven factors of awakening. These are wonderful qualities of awareness, clarity, vitality, joy, tranquility, unification, kind of *samādhi*, and equanimity.

These states are supposed to be brought into fulfillment, completion within us, so they fill us. Again, they are not practices we do, but states that we bring to fulfillment. Some translators actually use the word “perfection” for some of these, which can be a little bit confusing or make them out of reach. But to become full, filled, endowed with, to become these things rather than simply to have them, like in the corner of your mind you have a little bit of vitality

or joy, is different. You become this thing.

This goes along with how the tradition talks about what we, in English, call practice. They use the word *bhāveti*, and *bhāveti* means to grow. It's a verb meaning to grow, to cultivate, and it's used for a farmer or gardener growing plants, for example. So we become the gardener of our own inner life, and we're growing something there.

We plant seeds. The seeds sprout. We water them, we nourish them, and they grow, and they grow into bigger and bigger things. Eventually, what they grow into is described, actually referred to, as fruit.

Because, kind of at the highest level of where this practice goes, there's a fruition. We attain the fruit. And what's the fruit? You're the fruit. There is a gradual maturation until you're ripe.

There is gradual maturation until, if you're an apple, you're really sweet and nice and ready. The fruit has become full. The fruit has become ripe. And so they talk about attaining the fruit.

Sometimes there is language in this *Theravāda* tradition that the path, or the whole experience of maturation, is described as attaining the path and attaining the fruit. Attaining the path is the path that we walk. The path is the practices we do and what we're engaged in. But at some point, it's not the path that we walk, but the path that we attain.

Meaning, all the stuff that we're doing, the practices we're doing—mindfulness, ethics, loving-kindness, compassion, practices of *samādhi*, and learning, becoming wise—all these things are what we engage in as we walk the path until we attain the path. Meaning, all those are integrated into us. They become us. And when that happens in a full way, then we experience the fruit of that.

The fruit has ripened in us, but it might have started with a little seed. In fact, you might not even know that you have this little teeny seed somewhere. It's almost invisible. Like some of the biggest trees in California have the smallest seeds: the redwood trees.

Some people find this whole idea of a path, and where it can go, and becoming full with it all, off-putting or intimidating because they can't see how they can get from A to B. It just seems so far. That's where learning more about the practice and understanding the context for it, and the means for getting from A to B, is helpful.

It is fascinating that it's said that the fastest way to go from A to B on this path of maturation is to be fully at A. So, on your mark, get set, go. Success! You did it. Not only that, Buddhism

is competitive sports.

But what's wonderful about that competition is we all reach the present moment at the same time. So, isn't that nice? All sports should be that way. We all win together.

So this idea that to be fully here—there's more to Buddhist practice than that—but that's part of the function of mindfulness: not to be focused on what we can gain, but rather to find a way to be fully and completely aware, present, mindful of this moment here. So that the experience of being alive right now is not compromised by anxiety, ambition and greed, conceit, dwelling in the past and never leaving the past behind, always kind of stuck there, or only thinking about the future.

You know, like you keep looking at your watch, you're thinking about enlightenment: “Am I there yet? Am I there yet?” And if you do that, you're going to stay a little kid in the back seat, and you'll never grow up. You have to really start getting into the driver's seat, which in Buddhism means: here, be fully here. Do not compromise this experience of being here, present.

What not compromising it does is it creates space, room for things to grow and develop within us. We have these amazing qualities that can develop. Some of them do not really require a lot of self-conscious effort to grow them. They will grow if you learn this uncompromising way to be here right where you are.

They will grow faster if you appreciate them. If you appreciate that, “Oh, now I'm here, and I feel calmer, more tranquil. This is good,” that tranquility and calm can grow if it's appreciated. Right here, I have clarity. Clarity not about what to do with my life, but it just feels clear, the present moment. I feel like I'm living in the present moment, you know, kind of feeling awake in it and alive in it, and a certain vitality that feels really good.

There might grow, as we practice this present-moment awareness, a unification, a gathering together of all the parts that we are: the fragmented parts, the scattered parts. One of the ways that this goal of practice is described in the tradition is with the word, probably, *sakala*, with all our parts coming together rather than all our parts being scattered. A person who has become mature in this practice is described as someone who is *sakalī*, *sakalī*. That is someone who has become whole.

And part of the goal is to be one of *sakala*, which is to become whole. The entirety of who we are gets gathered here and is working together. This idea of harmonizing all of who we are, unifying all we are, and not being divided, not being scattered, is part of the purpose of really being here at A.

Because many times, if we're too focused on our to-do list and we're rushing to get everything done, we're not going to be here very well. We actually become less and less us, and more and more out there in the future, trying to do, trying to complete, trying to get everything done, be everything for everybody. The less you are for yourself.

One of the very unfortunate things about Buddhism—and now you've probably decided to give it up now when you hear this—is that if you really want to be complete, whole, to really allow this whole unification, gathering together of all of who you are into some peaceful, harmonious whole place where these wonderful qualities can grow, you probably can't do everything life asks you to do, or everything that you want to do. Some of us are probably going to have to wisely decide to do less. So that we have the time and ability to spend time at A, to spend time really here in a higher-quality way.

One modern way of talking about it is to spend quality time with yourself. That's what meditation is. Some of us need to spend more quality time with ourselves so that we know ourselves, just get to know ourselves. Some people are strangers to themselves.

One way we know that people are strangers to themselves is because many people, when they first start meditating, what they encounter is bad news. What they encounter is all the things that are unresolved, all the things that have not been tended to and cared for, loved, and allowed to heal. So we notice our fears, notice our hurts, our wounds, notice our scattered mind. We notice that we're mostly preoccupied about who knows what.

The mind is caught up in certain thoughts and ideas. And we start noticing some of the quieter, normally invisible beliefs that are underpinning how we live our life, how we understand ourselves, how we understand other people. Some of the underlying beliefs that we have are beliefs that do not help us become whole, but actually keep us divided, keep us partial, keep us kind of under the thumb of ways we undermine ourselves.

So, this idea of being fully here is so we can start doing the housekeeping, housecleaning, of what's here. So that when the house is clean, then there's space to invite the guests. When we become clean, when we've done our housecleaning and are really here to be present, there's a way in which the calm, the peace, the openness, the space that gets created in our hearts and in our minds, makes room now for things to grow.

Things can't grow if we're tense. If we're always tense, then we're closing the space up. We're not only closing the space up, but we're also preventing the light that lets the plant grow from coming in. And the light that these beautiful qualities grow in is awareness, attention. So fully being at A with awareness is the thing that allows things to grow.

The way the tradition kind of doesn't say it explicitly, but how I understand it, is that it says some things require us to be not fully connected to ourselves, being selective and being attached or caught in certain parts of ourselves. In order for those things to thrive in us, it's better that we're not aware of what's going on. So if there's a lot of greed, it's better not to know the cost that greed has on us. If we have a lot of hate, if we really understood the impact it had on us, we would not have hate. So it's better not to know that.

So just keep focusing on the object of hate. Keep focusing on the object of greed. If we get caught up in sensual desires and we get caught up in aversions, caught up in doubts, sometimes we're caught in very self-deprecating belief systems inside. If we want to be successful at these kinds of negative mindsets, it's better not to pay attention, because that gives them free rein. Because if we pay careful attention, the light of awareness goes on them. It's hard for them to keep growing.

I liken it to a greenhouse that has been covered with blackout cloth. It gets hot in there, but there's no light coming in. So the plants that you want to grow there—beautiful flowers or tomatoes or something—they can't grow. But what grows is slimy mold, and it thrives in there. It's just like, so happy, the mold.

But people don't even want to go in there because it's actually dangerous with all the mold and mildew and everything growing there. If you clear away the blackout curtains and let the sunlight come in, the slime and the mold and the mildew dries out, and the plants can begin growing. In the same way, we have these beautiful plants inside: loving-kindness, compassion, joy, wisdom, equanimity, *samādhi*, a certain kind of happy vitality, joy and happiness themselves.

There is the developing of mindfulness, developing of strong intentionality, the *Eightfold Path*. There are all these things that are emphasized in the tradition that we want to grow. And the tradition is quite, as I said before, clear about the degree to which it is possible to grow these within ourselves into a place where they are complete. They fill us. We become them, and in the process of becoming them, we become whole, not divided.

And so the goal of awakening does involve some radical letting go, but it also involves becoming whole in ourselves, becoming complete. There is a beautiful way in that, because we think that this tradition doesn't want to talk very exactly about enlightenment. I think there is a very precise way that the Buddha describes what an enlightened person is.

So, I mean, now you want to get—this is like, you'll know now exactly what it's all about. If someone would come to the Buddha and say, “Like, who are you? What are you?” Because

clearly he got people's attention with his awakened state, or his kindness, or his clarity, or something, so they could say, "Well, what are you? Who are you?" Being very precise, so people would know exactly what he is, that couldn't be more precise, he would say, "I'm like this."

Anything else is going to be only part of the whole. Anything else selects something out of the totality. And why divide yourself? The idea of "I'm like this" is a way of being completely yourself, without needing to prove yourself, defend yourself, without needing to be anything for anybody.

In the same way as the apple tree, even with ripe fruit on its branches. What's the apple tree like? Well, look, it's like that one. Is that the perfect apple tree? Go through the orchard. Which one's perfect?

They're all perfect. They're all themselves. They're all just whole. I think the apple tree doesn't think about the leaves as separate from the rest of the tree, or the branches as separate from the trunk, or the roots as being separate. They're just one whole, complete organism that's not dividing itself in its thoughts and ideas.

"I hope people notice how well I'm stretching out my branches. Boy, am I proud of my branches going just that way, much better than the branches of the next tree." The tree is just being itself. So the Buddha said, "I'm like this." Something very profound.

And it's also a way of saying, "I'm just here at A." But now A has become B without going anywhere. So this idea of gradual growth, gradual maturation, and taking that into account, appreciating that this path is not meant to be a path to some quick, sudden, you know, enlightenment.

Because, I mean, I know in the modern world there are a lot of things we're supposed to do and can do, a lot of recreational opportunities, and a lot of Netflix. There are a lot of things that we can do. So the best thing to do is to get enlightened efficiently, quickly, so you can get on to the other things. It's the opposite.

The best thing going in life is to have the heart be free, the heart at peace in itself. To have the heart be feeling complete, at home, content, ready to meet this world with its care, its love, and its compassion. I don't think there's anything better. And I think it's well worthwhile on this path of being fully at A, so we can mature these good hearts that we have.

Buddhism has a very positive message. If you emphasize too much only letting go, only this idea of no-self, then you miss so much of the positive, inspiring message of what the Buddha

had to teach. And it's a very positive message about what's possible here in this lifetime. The *Eightfold Path* can be attained here and now in this life.

So, to all of you today who came here to be fully at A with each other here at IMC, I thank you for your interest, your practice. To sit together this way is exceptional, and I thank you for it all. And may we continue together for a long time. Thank you.