

Cultivation of Insight

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So, good morning, everyone. I would like to begin by reading a passage from the teachings of the Buddha. There are a number of places where he talks about his awakening. This is the one that does so in the most social terms, in the context of the challenges of his times.

It is kind of touching for me, given how challenging our times have become. I grew up with my parents' generation having gone through World War II, and I talked to people who had experienced it very intimately in Asia and all over Europe. I heard a lot of stories, and the whole experience was very prominent for me. I was always somewhat relieved that we were not going through the same global level of violence.

But in seeing all the challenges that are always in the world, I do not think I have ever seen it get as close to the edge of what happened in World War II as it is currently, at least in my way of reading what is going on. And so, in that kind of context, there is this very evocative passage. It is a poem in what is called the *Sutta Nipāta*, one of the anthologies of ancient poetry.

The Buddha says, in this translation—and I translated it myself, but I could not find my translation easily today—so I am going to paraphrase Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation: "When embraced, violence breeds danger and fear. Look at people quarreling, and I will tell how I experienced dismay."

We do not usually associate the Buddha with experiencing dismay. There is a way in which he is a highly idealized figure, always—whether before he became enlightened or after—depicted as being completely perfect. Dismay does not exactly represent perfection. So, this description is very human, and I really appreciate this.

"Look at people quarreling, and I will tell of how I experienced dismay, seeing people floundering like fish in small puddles, in conflict with one another. As I saw this, fear came into

me.” Here is another very human side of the Buddha. Again, in the perfection of how the Buddha is almost deified in the history of Buddhism and becomes such a being of perfect perfection, we do not associate that with someone who is afraid.

So, “I saw all this violence, and fear came to me. The world is entirely without a core; all directions are being tossed around. Wanting a harbor for myself, a safe place for myself, I saw nowhere I could go. Seeing nothing in the end but conflict, I felt discontent.”

And then, this is his enlightenment. This is his answer to all this. He was afraid. He was dismayed. He had fear.

“And then I saw an arrow here, so very hard to see, embedded in the heart. Overcome by this arrow, you run in all directions. But simply on pulling it out, you do not run, and you will not sink.”

So, his description of his awakening is that he saw something in his own heart that he calls an arrow. Some people try to call it a dart because it fits better there than an arrow, but it is a metaphor. He sees something, and he pulls it out.

In pulling it out, he is then free of his dismay, free of his fear, free of needing to find a safe harbor in this world that does not provide that. In seeing it in himself, and seeing that it has been pulled out, he recognizes that others have this too. This is why people are running around kind of like chickens without heads. Maybe none of you are that way, of course.

The rest of the poem describes the practices that he taught to be able to do this deep work. That is what I thought I would offer today: a little orientation about this. It is a little bit of a warm-up for me for the theme of the retreat that I start this week. So, you will get a taste of it, and we will spend a whole week on this kind of theme.

In this poem, the solution came when he saw something. This ability to see clearly, to see deeply—he saw something in his heart. I know that for myself, when I am agitated and spinning and preoccupied in my mind, I cannot really see myself clearly. I cannot see deep into my heart.

I have to get quiet enough and settled enough. The conditions have to be in place in such a way that I can see. I think this is what the Buddha teaches as well: part of practice is to create conditions so that we can see deeply. I would say: to see in a new way.

One of the topics from last week’s talk was: Can we see deeply? Can we see in a way that brings peace to ourselves? If it starts with us, then perhaps we can offer it to the world around us as well—the world that needs peace.

But if we continue to be one of the fish floundering in a small puddle, and are dismayed, angry, or afraid, it is all too easy that we create the conditions that perpetuate the challenges of this world rather than solve them. People who are afraid, angry, upset, and despairing usually do not behave that wisely. Usually, they do not see very clearly what is going on.

Then all kinds of opinions, attitudes, judgments, biases, and reactivity come up that do not usually contribute to greater peace in this world. So, how do we see? How do we settle fear and dismay? How do we settle reactivity enough so we can start seeing more clearly?

The theme of the retreat is that, in order to do that, there is what we want to see deeply in this tradition of insight. But then there are the conditions that prepare us to see well. It is kind of nice—or perhaps more than nice. Maybe there is something profound to it—that we cultivate the opposite of what we want to see.

What we want to cultivate, according to this teaching of the retreat, is a deep inner stability, a steadiness that in the tradition is often called *samādhi*. Sometimes, in English, it is called concentration, but that misses the real benefit, or what is really being cultivated here, and the purpose for which it is cultivated. We want to be able to have a strong, stable inner life: steady, peaceful, quiet, so that we can see clearly.

The metaphor I like to use for this is the difference between making yourself into a tripod so the telescope can look at the moon, versus standing on a moving train car and holding the telescope in your hand, trying to focus on the moon. It is going to be very hard in that kind of situation. Or maybe you are in the back of a pickup truck going over a bumpy dirt road, trying to see the moon.

You need to be still, stopped, quiet. Then there is a tripod, because even if you are standing still, you cannot hold the telescope still enough. Our inner life is so precious and so valuable that we really need to have this stability. So, we have to stop something.

We have to stop driving down the bumpy roads of our minds and our life, so that we can somehow see clearly. The other thing that the Buddhist tradition emphasizes, the second thing that is the opposite of what is going to be seen, is that it is really helpful to discover and cultivate a sense of well-being. We cultivate happiness.

Some people find this counterintuitive because they think, “I am despairing, the world is falling apart, the sky is falling, and we better just run around.” The last thing you want to do is be happy, because that somehow denies how difficult the world is. That denies how difficult my life is.

I have to hold on to how difficult it is. I have to hold on to being a victim, or I have to hold

on to the understanding of the challenge, because somehow that is supposed to provide the solution. To turn away from it and be happy is not going to do it.

But, in fact, what the Buddha says is that it is really important to be able to discover, in your own way, how not only to be settled and stable, but also to have some sense of well-being. Do not sacrifice that. Do not overlook that. Do not diminish the importance of it.

It is with a sense of well-being that you are not going to be so agitated that you cannot see. There is something about a basic well-being—not a happy-go-luckiness where you are just whistling and delighted and skipping around, because then maybe you do not see deeply either. Certainly, it is not a Pollyannaish happiness that looks at everything through sugary eyes or something.

But to really have a well-being continues this process of settling: settling the heart, settling the stomach, settling the shoulders. It is a sense of well-being because it clears the eyes to be able to see more clearly. It allows us to see what is difficult in a way we cannot be with what is difficult if we are already upset, anxious, and struggling.

So, to cultivate a sense of well-being, that is one of the conditions we want to develop. The third is what I call self-confidence, inner strength. We want to have a certain kind of inner dignity, an inner sense of value and importance, a kind of confidence in our humanity, in our beingness.

We want not to be dismissive of ourselves, not to undervalue ourselves, and not to be caught in insecurity or a sense of unworthiness. Rather, we want to cultivate a sense of worthiness, value, and confidence in oneself. This is inner strength for ourselves: strength of practice, strength of seeing, strength of honesty, and strength to be present without being agitated.

Another way of saying this is that we want to expand our personal capacity to be with what is challenging. Then our capacity to be with what is challenging is such that we can see clearly, rather than shutting down, getting agitated so we do not see, or running away. We want to be able to stand there in a confident way with the challenges that we see in ourselves and in the world around us.

So, we have to cultivate these three, and it cannot be that bad: stability, well-being, and self-confidence. A lot of Buddhist practice can be subsumed under these three different qualities. When these are cultivated, then we are ready to see in a new way.

There are three things the tradition emphasizes that we can see. The way I am introducing it to you today feels very important because, when I practiced in Thailand and Burma, these three new ways of seeing were emphasized over and over again, as if you could just do it from

day one. It was just, “This is the truth. This is what is really true. Just see this way, and just get over it,” or something.

I think it does some people a tremendous disservice. It can actually make life much more difficult. The first way of seeing in a new way is to see change: to see that everything is changing all the time, that there is nothing permanent. Everything is changing.

We kind of know that. For people who go through the kind of challenges the Buddha saw in the world—where everyone is in conflict, where there are war zones—I recently talked to someone who told me that their parents lost everything twice in their home country when there was war. They moved to another country, restarted their whole life, and the same thing happened there. They had to go to a third country in order to start their life all over again.

So, they know things change. They know that things change radically. Some children grow up in war zones where things are always changing, always horrible. To tell them, “Oh, things change. Just accept it,” makes the whole thing worse.

You cannot say that when change is awful and challenging, and perhaps even deadly for people, given what they see around them. I have had Buddhists come to me as a Buddhist teacher and say, “Gil, can you just remind people that everything is changing? That it is a Buddhist teaching; everything is impermanent.” Somehow, that is supposed to make it better when the situation is really awful.

I think that can do a disservice. It is the right thing for deep insight, to see in a new way. That is why it is so important to be prepared for it, to have a context for doing that.

The second way is to see suffering in a new way. There is a lot of suffering in this world, and Buddhists emphasize how important it is to see it. But not just to see it: to see it in a new way, to see it in a useful way.

There are people whose lives are unmitigated suffering of some form or another. People come and talk to me, and it is heartbreaking what some people are dealing with in their lives. It seems like there is no end to suffering for them.

There are a few people I have met in my teaching career who have some kind of condition where they have a lot of pain and no pain medication works for them. They are living with their whole body racked in pain, and sometimes they consider suicide because it is unmitigated. So, from day one, to say, “Buddhism: just look at your suffering. Life is suffering,” some people are going to hear that and give up all hope.

But if you can see in a new way, after there is a very clear context of stability, well-being, and

real confidence and value in oneself, there is a whole new possibility in seeing suffering. The third insight, sometimes called a way of seeing or a perception, is to see something that is called not-self.

It is often mistranslated as the idea that there really is no self, and that is not what the Buddha was saying. Rather, he was saying that there is nothing in the world that is worth, or appropriate, to make a claim to as, “This is myself. This is my true self.” You are important, you are valuable, you are a person. We are not denying you.

But the movement of the mind to latch onto something and then be defined by that thing is one of the sources of suffering. There is a way of seeing this fact: there is nothing here that I can claim as the self. Again, if you say that on day one to someone whose sense of self has been yanked away, destroyed, or devalued, who is confused, who has never had a chance to really matter in anybody’s life, it just makes it hopeless again and difficult for them.

I was very touched some years ago when someone I know was taking inner-city kids camping in forests, where they had never been in the natural world before. They found out that it was one of the kids’ birthdays, so they had a birthday party. The kid said, “I’ve never had a birthday party.”

Imagine a kid never having a birthday party, never being cared for that way. So, the idea in Buddhism is that, in this insight practice, the insights of insight practice are to be able to see change in a new way, to see suffering in a new way, and to see not-self—to see self in a new way. But only after you have done the cultivation and prepared the ground for it.

It is not supposed to be a belief you have. That is kind of how I heard it when I was in South-east Asia, over and over again: “This is the truth. This is what is really there, and you should believe it and live accordingly.” It is a little bit that way because, classically, they are called characteristics.

In early English translations, they were called—what are the marks that Jesus has on his hands called, from being nailed? Stigmata. The three stigmata of Buddhism. That is kind of a curious thing: three stigmata, the three that hurt.

But they are called the three characteristics. They say these are the three characteristics of reality, which makes it an absolute, existential, metaphysical truth about our existence. Everything is marked by these three characteristics. The Buddha never said that.

He was never interested in these wide, big, sweeping statements about reality itself, ultimate statements like this. The Buddha called them perceptions, ways of seeing. It has a very different feeling. It has more to do with how you see than with the nature of reality.

That is why I call it a new way of seeing. We can see change in such a way that we understand the opportunity in change, as difficult as it can be. We can find our freedom in relationship to it: not cling to it, not hold on to it, not pretend it is permanent, not try to make it permanent, not try to grip, close down, or run away.

Rather, we can stay there and be present for all the change with freedom. For that, this is what the Buddha talked about as pulling out the arrow. In the Buddha's language, the primary arrow is a metaphor that in English can be called thirst. There is a thirsting, a strong kind of craving, a strong kind of attachment to something.

Really, we are driven by a drivenness that we cannot be free of if we are driven. If we are addicted to something, then it is very hard to be free in the midst of all the change. If we are addicted to, or strongly wedded to, anything in the world—if it has to be this way in order for me to be happy—then, when that thing disappears, we are crushed.

There is a freedom that Buddhism emphasizes, a different kind of well-being, a happiness that comes from letting go of what our contribution is to suffering. The world is a hard place. It is hard to be human. But where we can make the most difference is in what we do to contribute.

The representative metaphor for our contribution is thirst, this drivenness. So, what is that? Can we find that arrow? Can we pull out that thirst? Can we pull out that drivenness?

What do we see then? One of the things we see is that we still see change, but we also see our freedom in the middle of it. Then change becomes something we can work with rather than resist. It becomes something with which we can perhaps help other people, because we find our freedom with it.

With this thing about suffering, there is a lot of suffering in the world, and we want to see our suffering, particularly, in a new way. In seeing it ourselves in a new way, maybe we can see other people's suffering in a new way and make a difference. For me, there was a time in my life, when I was a Buddhist monk living in monasteries, where I saw my suffering in a new way.

I knew I suffered a lot. In my early years of Buddhist practice, I mostly did not do meditation practice. I did suffering practice. It was actually invaluable for me to do that because I just stayed present.

I did not try to run away from it. I did not try to deny it. I did not have enough wherewithal or knowledge that I could do anything about it. I was so lucky that I was not trying to fix it.

Slowly, in just being present, something softened in me. Something gave way in me. One of the things that arose in its place was compassion, because I needed it so much. There was so much suffering.

Slowly, something relaxed and relaxed, meditating day after day, and then this compassion arose. That is a wonderful way to see oneself and see the world. At some point, I saw that for me, at the core, at the center, my little arrow in my heart was a certain kind of attachment to self: clinging to self, holding on to self for dear life.

I was surprised to discover this little seed deep inside that seemed to be—that is the only way I could characterize it. I began to understand that it did not have to be there. There was an alternative to that, but I could only do that by really seeing the dart, seeing that deep suffering. It was when I saw it in myself that that was the consequence of doing that.

I say this partly to defend the value of seeing this and doing this inner work. I hope this work is the consequence of doing this. I decided to dedicate my life to bringing Buddhism to people, and so, to some degree, you are here because of that.

This is not the example of someone who goes deep to see suffering and do this deep inner work, and then just goes to live in an enlightened retirement someplace. This work is consequential. It can really change you in a deep way if you can really see your own suffering.

As we see suffering, we see the clinging, we see the holding. We start seeing that this attachment to self, this clinging to self, is not needed. We start seeing how there are a lot of things that go on in this world. To see it well, this is interesting, but I do not have to make a self out of it, construct a self, or construct a self-definition out of it.

I need to be responsible for it. For example, in myself, if I am irritated, I do not have to say, “This is my true nature. I am an irritated person.” Rather, I see: this is irritation. There is irritation happening now. This is how it is now.

I have to be careful with it. Once upon a time, when I was 20 or 21, something happened in my life that made me really happy. It was kind of induced by the circumstances, but it lasted for some months. I had this idea: “I am never going to be depressed again. I am now just a happy person.”

I defined myself by it, and then I became more depressed than I had ever been in my life in the wake of that. This idea of making a self, making a self-definition—“This is who I am. I know who I am”—is problematic. I would say now that I know who I am because I know these different forces, states, thoughts, and beliefs inside of me well enough.

So, I see them, I take them into account, I am careful with them, and I am wise about them, hopefully. But I do not latch onto them as defining who I really am. That makes a world of difference. That belongs in that world of freedom. I have found it to be a freedom.

In this context, then, we cultivate stability and steadiness. We sit and meditate. We stand in a way where our feet are firmly on the ground. We sit in a chair with stability.

I meet with people who sit in chairs to talk to me, and sometimes I point out to people how they are sitting. Some people are sitting in ways that do not represent stability, strength, and confidence. The opposite is actually being expressed. Occasionally, I give people the exercise: “I wonder if you could just sit up straighter, sit away from the backrest, and put both your feet flat on the ground rather than crossed?”

“You seem to be collapsing in your chest. What would it be like if you had your chest more open?” Then I say, “Now sit and close your eyes and feel that for a while. What is that like for you? Thank you very much. Now you can go back and sit where you were.”

They do. I say, “Now what is the difference?” Their eyes go wide, and they say, “Wow, that is different. I had no idea that my ordinary posture was giving up on myself.”

Ordinary posture actually creates the energies, conditions, and feelings inside that make my life more difficult. But if I can sit in an upright, strong, stable posture, it creates a very different way of being in the world and being with myself. It allows me to be present and anchored, and not battered around so much by the world.

So, to create stability and strength, we are allowed to do that. Sometimes in Buddhism, when this idea of not-self is emphasized, some people take it to mean that you are not supposed to count. You are supposed to disappear, to be self-effacing and not be noticed, because otherwise you are exerting yourself.

The Buddha was not someone who did that. The Buddha was someone you always knew was there. He was fully there and present. So, you can do that if you want to be stable and create really good conditions for yourself to be able to see well, see the world well, and see yourself well.

Find a strong, stable way of holding your body, even. Then, how about your mind? Can you steady your mind? Some minds are jumping around all the time from one thing to another.

In myself, I was surprised when I started doing the web-surfing kind of thing and doing the clicks. When I stopped doing it, I said, “Wait a minute! I have lost my mind.” My mind just kept moving in the same way: “What is next? What is next? What is next?” Even though the

laptop was closed.

Wow, that was quick. It did not take long for the brain to be reconditioned and have the momentum of looking, looking, looking. There are some people who spend all day on the laptop, maybe for work. There are times when I have not recognized the effect something like being on the screen has had until I go to meditate.

It is so built into how I see the world sometimes that I do not recognize how it has affected me. It is the same thing when people sit in a collapsed posture on a chair, and that is their usual way of sitting. They do not recognize that that is what is going on. They need to sit up straight and strong to be able to recognize that.

The same thing: the 2026 mind that most of us have now. If you could just have a 1966 mind, you would think you were awakened. You would think you had been enlightened. Wow, this is different.

The whole world was so different, and it affects the mind. It affects how the mind works. There is a lot of research now, and a lot of effort to manipulate what is called the attention economy. Imagine that people's job is to deliberately manipulate your attention so you click, so you do.

There was a time when no one had that job, and you could just go about your life on the farm, take care of the animals, take care of the plants, and there was nothing keeping you distracted from that. You just did your thing. Then there is cultivating well-being.

We do that in Buddhism sometimes by cultivating loving-kindness. We do it sometimes through concentration practices that create a kind of unification, a gathering together. We do it by beginning to appreciate that there is more joy in life than we take advantage of: the simple joy of the blue sky, the beautiful tree, and a neighbor who smiles.

There are a lot of small things that we miss if we are constantly preoccupied. But to slow down enough to begin appreciating, there are a lot of things to appreciate here. If the whole experience of the world is seen through the filter, through the narrow little world of the news that happens on your laptop, that gives you a very skewed perception of what the world is like.

I was very delighted recently to talk to a person who I think was born in Haiti, has a Haitian background, goes back there regularly, and brings her children to Haiti. She said, "Yeah, in the capital, in the big cities, it is dangerous. But in the countryside, I let my kids run around and play unsupervised."

It is a beautiful country, beautiful people. There is a rich culture. I said, “Wow, I just knew Haiti by the headlines and by the news.”

So, I realized how biased I was in my perception of that country because my perception was completely shaped by the terrible news that comes out of it. I do not want to deny that is happening. But it had limited my ability to see it, to hear this woman’s joy of bringing her kids back there, far from the capital and far from the places of violence.

She represented that culture in such a beautiful, inspiring way that I was so happy to see: Oh, there is more to this world than what we see through the news. Then there is this mystery of self, and the mystery of being so at ease, so peaceful, so subtle, so confident, so stable that our mind can stop playing the self game.

The mind can stop seeing the world through the filter of me, myself, and mine. It can stop seeing while constantly judging, evaluating, and criticizing what we think is myself. It is remarkable what is possible.

So, to summarize this, we cultivate the opposite of what we eventually see. We are not supposed to try to see it this way. We are not supposed to try to see change. We are not supposed to try to see suffering. We are not supposed to try to see not-self.

Sometimes I call it revelation. Do the cultivation practice until it becomes obvious to you, until it comes to you. Sometimes, in this world, it will come to you sooner than you expect, sooner than you want. So, cultivate these three good things soon, because you do not know when you are going to need them.

Then you can respond well to how the world changes, be wise, and contribute to the world rather than be part of the problem. So, those are my thoughts for today. I hope that inspired you a little bit to do the cultivation part.

The third part does not really matter too much. You do not have to think about it too much until it is revealed. But now you are prepared for the revelation. So, thank you all very much.

Hmm. Hmm.