Thursday Dharma Talk

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So one January many years ago, I was being driven down in the back seat of a car to go join the Tassajara Monastery, to go there and be a monastic. I'd never been there before, so it was kind of a big deal to show up to do it. I was there for an open-ended period of time, but initially it would be for a three-month intensive period of practice. Never seeing the place, I didn't know what these practice periods were about.

But I was being driven down there with other people, and we stopped at one of the last little shopping centers before you go into the mountains. There was a bookstore. Some people were doing some shopping, so I went into the bookstore and went to the shelves where they had spiritual books, maybe Eastern spirituality. I didn't have much time, so I just randomly kind of pulled a book off the shelf, randomly opened it, and read a sentence randomly on the page.

The sentence said something like, “The problem that people have is they hold themselves apart from things.” Something like that. That’s the problem. So I closed the book, put it back on the shelf, got in the car, and drove to the monastery.

When I got to the monastery, that sentence stayed with me. I decided I didn't really like the way the sentence was worded—a problem—so I said, “I'll flip it,” and said to myself, “Rather than the problem, the solution is to participate with things, not hold yourself apart.” As I started my time in the monastery, that was kind of my practice: How do I participate with what I'm doing at the moment?

There were a few other lessons along the way that happened early on. One of them was during that drive in the car after the shopping center, after the bookstore. You go through Carmel Valley, which is a beautiful place. They have some spectacular oak trees there—the California Valley Oaks—and these oaks can be just huge and old and spectacular.

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I was in the back seat, looking out the windows and seeing these wonderful oak trees. I'd already done, you know, a year and a half of *Zen* practice with Zen centers. I'd done a fair amount of practice, maybe. So I was happy, content, looking out the window and looking at these oak trees.

It was this very strange experience that I never had before. I could feel or see, almost with a mind's eye, that there was the oak tree, there was me, and I was painting the oak tree on top of the oak tree. Somehow the conceiving mind, the constructing mind, was formulating some idea. It turned out it was pretty accurate. Thank you.

But it was still like there was a film. I felt, wait, but there's a film here. There's a filter here. I'm not seeing the tree by itself. I'm seeing through this kind of film construct that I'm making.

That's fascinating. Between me and the tree, there's something there: the idea of the tree, the image of the tree, somehow. So that was kind of showing me, wait a minute, there's a distance here, and there's something in the way. That followed, you know, a few minutes later, or half an hour later, from reading that sentence in the book.

I came to the monastery, and I was assigned to what's called general labor. A lot of the Zen training I received involved work. There was a lot of meditation during the day. There was work, and the work was as much part of the practice as the meditation was.

I was assigned to the task of sanding with an electric sander these big, big platforms that they were going to be sitting on—sitting platforms. There was, I don't know, there were—I think there were six of them, probably. Right? Those are—there used to be six. No, there's none.

All my work, I sanded and sanded and sanded. I spent three months sanding. I thought I should get my official certificate in Zen training: sanding. But it was wonderful because that was a task to participate in—to just be in the sanding, just sand and sand.

At the end of the workday, I never could finish, so I did what I did, and then I would go do the next rest meditation or whatever was next. The next day, I would start up again. But it was wonderful for me to give myself over to this physical activity. It was very simple, ordinary, and it wasn't very complicated to do.

So, just me and sanding. Tassajara is famous for its natural hot baths. There's sulfur water that comes out of the ground, and it's very hot. They have to cool it a little bit so you can go into these baths.

It was winter; it was cold. Every afternoon, around, I don't know, 4:30 or so, was bath hour. You got to go to the baths to shower, and, if you wanted, you could go into the plunge and get

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all hot. Since it was cold, it was nice.

Every day I went, and I would luxuriate in the baths for a while, like most people. It was nice. Then, after maybe four or six weeks of doing this, I started noticing something strange about how I was going into the plunge. I was showering off, going into the hot plunge to get warm because it was really cold in winter, and when I was warm enough, I got up, got dressed, and went to the next thing.

I thought, “Gil, what's wrong with you? You're supposed to relax and just luxuriate and just take it easy. What's the deal here? You should be—I mean, maybe you're too tense or something. You can't stay there and enjoy the hot baths.”

I thought about it for a while and watched myself as I went through the motions of all this. I realized one day that relaxing in the hot bath, luxuriating, was a compensation. It was a medicine for being tense in the day. Tension built up, and then it was really good to be in the bath and finally let go of the tension of the day.

But after I was there at the monastery, living this monastic life, meditating a lot, doing this work that was hard work but also wasn't stressful, I didn't need to relax. The bath wasn't a compensation. I wasn't living a reactive life that needed help to relax. So there was no need to luxuriate.

There was no need to lie in there and just relax. I was just happy and content. I got clean. It was good in the cold weather to get hot, and when I was hot enough, I got up and left.

It wasn't that I was tense or uptight or had to go do the next thing. I had a lot of long to-do lists, you know. Of course, right? At the monastery, the to-do list was: wait for the next bell and follow the signal.

This kind of relaxing and being at ease—it wasn't that I was super relaxed—but it felt really good. It felt very much like this is a healthy way of being, a healthy way of living. I specialized in getting as much sleep as I could at night because they went to bed kind of late and got up really early. I don't know what time we got up, 3:30 or something, 3:45.

The last sitting would end, and I would just make a beeline for my bed, get into bed, and then the morning had its wake-up bells. But I didn't get out of bed for the wake-up bells. Then they had this first signal that tells you to come to the meditation hall, and I wouldn't do anything. Then they had a second signal, and there were about five minutes in which you had to be there on time.

But I had it just down. I knew exactly when to get out of bed, put cold water on my face, put

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on my robe, and go there just as the door was going to be locked. I wanted to make sure I had enough sleep. So that was my kind of strategy for it.

It was strategic then. But it was really nice to be there. Maybe to make this long—I have a lot of stories to tell that maybe aren't so interesting—but this idea of participating was my *kōan*, was my instruction. It was just how to participate more fully.

I kind of did that with some of the things I enjoyed doing. It was a very physical Zen practice in life, and so it was really a wonderful *kōan*, a wonderful question to keep asking myself, until they assigned me to the kitchen. Now, I was there to meditate, and we did a fair amount of meditation. But if you're in the kitchen, you can't meditate much.

So this was not good news. They said, "You know, you're being assigned to the kitchen for the year." I'd only been there for nine months, and already I was going to miss out. So that was that.

I walked into the kitchen, and I was kind of intimidated by the kitchen. The kitchen was so big, and I said, "Wow." I thought that chopping vegetables was not really Zen practice. Sanding was. Other things were, but chopping vegetables?

For the first three months, I was the prep cook. I did a lot of chopping. What kept coming, what kept staying with me, was, "Participate, participate." I got to watch all the ways that, like that sentence in the book said, I didn't want to participate.

I wanted to hold myself apart. I could feel this repulsion from the carrots. I could feel myself turning my body toward the door to leave. I really didn't want to be there.

So I just kept turning myself back, turning myself back. Participate, participate. Just be fully this. Be here.

You know, kind of like one with a carrot kind of thing. I came to love it. Finally, my resistance, my aversion to that, all the doubts I had, and my feeling that I was missing out began to dissipate and relax. Then I was just right there, and it turned out I loved chopping vegetables.

It was just really great to just participate. Love is maybe not the best way of saying it because I would kind of forget myself in it. It was just the chopping. It just felt so wholesome and good, not to have anything else going on.

Maybe love is too much to say. It was better than love because it was just being there, very simply and plainly, peacefully doing the activity of the moment without any tension, without any resistance. Sometimes there was a lot of sense of who I was disappearing. If I was anybody at all, I was the carrot chopper.

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That was my identity: I was chopping carrots. Then I got to be the broccoli chopper. So I was very flexible with my identities then. But that was part of Zen training, or the Zen approach.

I got the sense, or got the teaching in Zen, that there is no abiding, permanent self that you are, that you want to hold on to and be and make and construct. But if you wanted to know who you were, it was whatever you were doing in the moment. So if you're sitting at Zen meditation, you were a meditator. If you were sweeping the courtyard, you were a sweeper.

If you're chopping vegetables, you're a veggie chopper. It was fascinating to have this idea that who we are is whatever activity we were doing. That's the thing. Give ourselves over to this and that activity.

In the context of the monastery, it was very freeing to do this. There was no need to prove myself or be something, be somebody, for other people. The rules of society, of how you're supposed to kind of be in some way, kind of disappeared. I just followed the chopping of vegetables.

The bell rang, I went to the *zendō*, the meditation hall. When it was time to sweep, I went and swept. When it was time to go to the baths, I went to the baths. It was a very simple life.

People, you know, part of the irritation of people who are old like me is we look back to the pristine, wonderful way it was in our youth, when there was no internet. We had a crank phone. We'd go into this little booth and we'd crank the phone, and we'd get the operator. Then we'd tell the operator our number, and he would connect us to where we were going to go.

The wire for the telephone just lay on the ground, over branches, or over the mountains there in the wilderness. Every once in a while, some deer would trip over it and break it. Sometimes I was sent—I was the telephone repairman. I would take this little shoulder bag with a field telephone with me.

I would drive all the way out of the mountains, all the way around to the halfway point between the monastery and civilization, and find the wire. Then I would connect my field phone to that wire, and I'd crank. If I got Tassajara, I knew the break was toward civilization. If I got the operator in civilization, I knew the break was the other way.

Then I'd go halfway again, and halfway again, until I could find the break. A friend of mine who did it one year was based in Switzerland. He was deep in the wilderness doing that telephone repair, so he called his mother on the crank phone. So it was simple back then; life was simple.

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So, participate. How do we hold ourselves apart? How do we keep ourselves from participating? How do we create these films between us and what we're doing, and have those keep us separate?

How do we keep ourselves separate from ourselves? How do we not participate in ourselves? This thing that I learned in the monastery, those first months, about how tense I was before coming to the monastery, and how I needed to release the tension and take care of it and relax and take these long hot baths—and how that need disappeared. The tension, in a certain way, kept me apart from myself.

The tension limited me, and I had a whole different sense of who I was when the tension wasn't always there with me. It was kind of strange at first. I didn't know what it was, and I didn't recognize it. There must be something wrong with me here.

I'm not the way you're supposed to be, or how I thought I always had been. So it took a while to realize, “Oh, this is actually a good way to be. This is healthy.” To begin shedding some of the personas, some of the films, some of the resistance, some of the struggles, some of the tensions, so we can participate here with ourselves fully.

To be really here. It's fine if you go to work in the kitchen to participate with the vegetable chopping or the dishwashing. Just do that. But the same principle applies to meditation here.

You're here to participate with yourself. In Zen meditation, it is not that passivity. It's more seen as an activity that you engage in, where you're engaging in a very dynamic, upright way of doing nothing. Except allowing life to course through you.

It's kind of like you're getting out of the way, but not out of the way to become kind of just a puddle on the floor, just limp. Rather, it is to allow yourself to participate fully with the life, the lived life, that we are. To participate fully with the body breathing. Usually our breathing knows how to breathe just fine without us.

It is problematic when we start interfering with the breathing too much. But there's something very profound about joining the breathing, participating in it, being there together, entering into just the experience of breathing, becoming the breather. Who are you? I'm the breather.

There's nothing else. Participating with the sitting. This is the world. This is what the Buddha called the human body: each person's world.

This is your world. Really show up for it. Participate in it. This idea that our inner world,

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who we are, is as beautiful and as precious and as inspiring as being in a beautiful natural environment.

We're not ugly. We're not wrong. We're not, in any kind of way, at fault. We're all kind of like a tree.

We all have our perfection in all the different ways, and we have a society that doesn't grant that to people. It doesn't help people to see that. I think one of the great gifts we can give people is to see everyone as a gift. Imagine some of you have gazed upon trees here, gazed upon flowers and plants and rocks, gazed upon insects and butterflies and birds and ponds, and you've kind of been nourished.

Some of you told me you've been nourished by it and benefited by it. Something relaxes in you in seeing something that is so simple and natural, something that, in very important and literal ways, is nourishing our lives. Trees are making oxygen so we can live. In Japanese Zen, sometimes the monastery is called the woods, or forest.

So all the monastics are the trees. Can we see each other the way we see trees? Can we appreciate each other and see the beauty, the gift? Is it one or two of you, maybe, accidentally, who is it, maybe a little bit odd?

You know exactly who you are. We're all odd. We're all oddities because we have to be. Each tree is odd.

Each tree is its own little thing. But we don't say trees are odd. No one's really odd. They're just unique.

The unique perfection of you, the unique beauty of you. When I did a family retreat for years at Spirit Rock, Betsy Rose used to sing this beautiful song that was very meaningful for me. I won't sing it to you, but I'll speak it:

> How could anyone ever tell you that you're anything less than beautiful? How could anyone ever tell you you're anything less than whole? How can anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle? How deeply we're connected in the heart.

That's my version. How deeply we're connected. How could anyone ever tell you you're anything less than beautiful? But what does it mean to participate with that beauty?

What does it mean to let go of the tensions, let go of the distance, let go of the films we have about ourselves, and be fully? If whatever you're fully doing is who you are, if you want to fully be you, you have to be fully what you are doing: sitting and breathing, being very simple,

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being present, being awake. Participate in that. See your participation as participating in your beauty.

It's particularly true when you get quiet and you're not seeing things through the filter of your thoughts, ideas, history, and memories. Sometimes I've done that hand exercise where I ask people, before they do the hand exercise, to feel and sense their hands, to look at their hands, and consider all the ways in their lifetime they thought their hands weren't up to snuff, just weren't right. Really, you know, just look at them and kind of see how they're really odd.

Most people get depressed or say, “What is this? What's it doing?” Then I say, “Now let go of that, and now feel the hands.” My hope is that, by having such a sharp contrast, you see the dramatic difference between what it's like to see yourself through the filter of all these crazy ideas we construct, and to let go and feel and sense the body's experience of itself.

The body's own experience occurs. The sensations occur without the filter, without the film of judgments and comparisons to right and wrong and ideals we have, how it should be and shouldn't be. The hand is happy being a hand from the inside out. The hand would love it if you just left it alone, you know, if you have all these judgments and ideas about it.

To be on the inside of this body of ours is where we can start sensing how beautiful it is, how special it is, free of all these ways that we divide ourselves. It's a way of feeling our wholeness when we don't divide it. So, to participate here fully, to really show up, be here, and then to discover, maybe getting hints at first, how it can be very peaceful. There can be amazing teachings that come from this.

Just being fully here, participating just with this, not trying to participate with the world out there, the world of the future, the world of the past. Letting all that fall away, so we're just fully here in this beautiful natural world that's within us. In many ways, it is the same way that some people go for a walk in the woods, and something happens where sometimes we forget the world around us, the past, and the future. It's so simple and nice.

Why not do it when you sit? The simple answer to that is more difficult, but it can be done. I was deeply touched these last two mornings at that 8:30 sitting. To sit in the room with all of you—I know there were many different things going on; that doesn't mean I couldn't see—but it was impressive how still it was in here.

It was a stillness that was queerly beautiful, precious. It felt like a jewel, or like something amazing, to feel the peace, the stillness, the quiet, the collective intention and involvement. There's something powerful that happens when we start discovering how little we need to

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cling. We can trust the inner beauty that doesn't abide, that is not inclined to being unwholesome.

We can feel and sense differently wholesome and unwholesome, and know intimately, obviously, what feels like raw imbalance. We've lost ourselves. We've shut off, cut off from ourselves. We're doing something that's even a kind of violation of ourselves in certain ways of being.

We can feel it. Because we know what is wholesome and what's unwholesome, we don't then have unwholesome tendencies and unwholesomely pounce on it, unwholesomely criticize it, or criticize ourselves for having it. We don't pile on the unwholesome. We just see, “Oh, look at that. Back to the silliness.”

It's just a Roman legion with their swords drawn. You can't come in like that. Why don't you drop your swords and come in three at a time, your youngest soldiers first, and then we'll serve you dinner? That's very different.

Meet things with wholesomeness so that you return to the whole. That song that I liked from Betsy Rose: “How can anyone ever tell you you're anything less than whole?” So we're participating fully here. There's the search, the quest—not for deep insight, because that's so easy to then be separated, to have this thing that divides and selective attention, like something here is a trick, this is going to do it.

Rather, relax and show up and be present for the whole. There's a way of being just with. What's kind of paradoxical is, the more we settle, the more we drop past and future, preoccupations and thoughts, and just really allow ourselves to be here, this world here gets simpler and simpler. There's a way, almost, that you get more and more a feeling of whole, and less and less of you that's here.

Sometimes even time disappears. Sometimes you're screaming for the bell to be rung. But sometimes time disappears. Sometimes any impulse to move disappears.

The bell does ring, and it doesn't mean anything. You just don't want to. Why move? Sometimes the body softens, so that the ordinary things we're preoccupied about our body—my hair is too short, too long; it's rather unfortunate; I'm a person who wears glasses; it's called four-eyes—those kinds of ideas don't exist.

They fall away. Sometimes the body falls away, and you're sitting here without a body. I've had to open my eyes to make sure we're still here. I couldn't believe it, like, I can't feel it at all.

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It feels so good. It's so sweet. It's so wonderful. So I had to peek.

Nope, I'm still here. It's safe. But the point being that it gets simpler. Or it might just be that we settle into the breathing.

That was one other thing that happened, I think partly because of the whole life in Zen, the monastic life, the sitting, the working, the simplicity of it. I would sit down to do my breath meditation, and sometimes I would just kind of, without even the effort, the idea of almost anything disappeared, except just participating with the breath. Then the breath would get quieter and stiller, quieter and stiller. I remember the first time: it was so peaceful, so quiet, and the breathing disappeared.

There was no more breathing. Then I realized what was happening, and I suddenly gasped, "I'm going to die!" You're supposed to die if you don't breathe. Eventually I learned that you have to do that.

This is one of the rare times when it seems like you don't have to breathe in deep meditation. Some people say you're breathing through your pores. I don't know, but it certainly feels very peaceful. What I'm trying to say with all this is that there's a way in which things get simpler and simpler.

It feels more and more whole. So it isn't that you have to be whole and go around and take an inventory of all your parts. Something very different happens. The whole becomes softer, more spacious, more open, more present here, and it gives us a reference point that is phenomenally different for how to live our life.

Now someone might say, "Well, that's kind of selfish, to sit and meditate and do all this stuff by yourself. The world out there is full of—you've got to help it." So this is the world. This idea of participation: there's no difference. The whole world is participating.

You're always participating in the whole world. But how do you want to participate in the world? What kind of participant are you? To rush back and put on the clothes of tension and stress, to go back to the way things were with irritation and greed and fear and clinging to things and worrying about things—and is that what they want us to do?

Is the world a better place if we're involved with the world, just maybe our mindfulness has helped us to cling better? I don't think that's good. In the myths of ancient Buddhism, when societies fell apart with violence, degradation, and all kinds of things, the way the world gets renewed and revived is that people go into the forest to meditate. People go into the forest and start discovering, start living by the precepts.

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They start discovering what it means to be ethical, what it means to be wholesome. Remember, ethical and wholesome are the same. They start learning from the inside what it means to be peaceful, compassionate, caring. Because in the ancient myths of Buddhism, the outer world that we live in is a manifestation of the inner world.

In these myths, in the kind of mythological origin stories of the world, as human beings started to get a little bit greedy, things got a little bit worse in the world. More greedy, things got a little worse and more worse in the world. When they stopped just being greedy and stealing from each other, but then hated each other, things got worse in the world, and the world just kind of decayed and got worse. It's almost as if the way the Buddha wants to depict our relationship to the world is that we're continuous with the world, and the natural world around us is partly shaped by our ethics.

How could we argue otherwise these days? So much of the world we see around us is deeply conditioned, deeply affected by the unethical way of living that humans are living on this world. Yes, how people are on the inside shapes the world that we live in on the outside. The way the Buddha emphasized is that everything starts turning for the better in the myths, at least, when some people go into the forest to do this important inner work.

Here we are; we've come to the forest, and we're doing this work. My teacher in Burma, U Paṇḍita, would express his tremendous appreciation for people who came to do this kind of practice. He felt this was really important for the world: to do this inner work, to discover the nature in ourselves. Because if we discover it here, that's not a personal and private affair.

That makes you a person who will heal this world, contribute to a better world. Maybe you will go back into the world. Those friends of yours say, “Come, you're being selfish,” and you say, “Well, I'll be there soon.” You don't go back to be selfish in a world full of selfish people.

You go back to serve, to help, to support, to care. Maybe not actively in certain ways, but just because you are—that's who you are—you become an ethical person. That is what the Buddha was trying to cultivate: not people who practice ethics, but people who are ethical. People's very being has been centered into the wholeness.

Let go of all the forces that keep us divided, and we become people who want to unify. This movement to wholeness is not just in ourselves, but also in our societies. When the Buddha talked about wholesome speech, wholesome speech is speech that unifies the divided. I think that's a remarkable statement.

When we practice wholesome speech, we're practicing speech that unifies the divided. There, too, there is this principle of becoming whole as a society. How do we contribute to that? The

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best, I think, the best way is to do this practice here.

If you had a little taste this morning, even the slightest hint of the reference point of non-clinging, the reference point of what is wholesome here, that makes a world of difference to know that. Many people in our world don't even know. They don't even have a hint. Come back here in yourself.

Participate, participate in this world. Don't create barriers. Don't create us versus them. Don't create good and bad in yourself.

Find a way to really participate in this life wholesomely, completely, fully, in your way, in your unique, not odd way. How could anyone ever tell you you're anything less than beautiful? How could anyone ever tell you you are anything less than whole? How could anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle?

How deeply we're connected in the heart. Thank you all very much.

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