Keeping Practice Connected to What Matters

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Good evening, welcome. Can we have the volume just up a little bit, Jim, please? There we go. That feels a little bit better. How's the volume for you guys? Okay.

I'd like to start with this small vignette that we find in the Pali Canon[1], the early Buddhist literature, where the Buddha is describing meditation practice. He's comparing meditation practice to a cook. He describes a cook who is preparing food for their boss. One cook just keeps on preparing the food that they know how to make and they're just offering it day after day to the boss. The boss thinks the food's okay, it's fine.

Then there's another cook who is preparing meals, and this cook notices, "What is the boss like? What are they going back for having more of? What are they not even touching?" This cook is paying attention to what's happening to the food that they're cooking. Does the boss like it? Do they not like it? It's not that they're hovering over the meal every second of the time after it's served. They're just paying attention.

The Buddha calls this first cook, the one that's just making food and sending it out without paying attention to what gets eaten or not, foolish and inexperienced. If they're not pleasing what the boss wants, there might be some consequences to that. The Buddha calls the second cook, the one who is making dishes and paying attention to what the boss likes and doesn't like, astute and competent. In the sutta[2], it gives a long list about pungent, sweet, or bitter—all these different flavors that are in types of food.

He goes on to say that in some ways, meditation practice is like this. In the same way, we would be foolish to mechanically do the same practice over and over without ever really seeing if the "boss" likes it. Of course, we are both the cook and the boss here. But it's not about whether we *like* it. It's not about preferences. If this were only about preferences, it would be so much easier. We would have mood music here, and it would be something different than what it is here. [Laughter] If it was just about nothing but a pleasant experience, I guess that would be more like a spa rather than coming here to a meditation center.

This can be a way in which it is helpful for us to periodically check in about how practice is going instead of mechanically doing the same thing again and again. I know when I'm offering guided meditations, I'm often offering similar instructions. Not exactly the same, but I'm often pointing to the same place: mindfulness of the sensations of breathing. It's often what I offer because it's a generic practice. But those of you who have been on meditation retreats or have met with a

teacher for practice discussions know that often those one-on-one meetings are when the instructions get tweaked, adjusted, or completely abandoned. Sometimes the teacher says, "Don't listen to what I'm saying out to everybody in the hall. For you, I think something else would be better."

In the same way, if you don't have a teacher or someone you're talking with, is there a way you can check in and evaluate whether what you're doing is supporting you and is appropriate for the "boss"? We could ask, what do you want out of your practice? What brought you to a meditation practice? Why do you meditate?

We don't want to be obsessive—like, "Am I there yet? Am I there yet?" I've given talks about how the more we measure ourselves, the worse it is. I remember titling a talk, "Measuring is like *me-ing*." We kind of get self-obsessed: "Am I there yet? Oh, I'm not there. Oh my gosh, what's wrong with me?" Somewhere in the middle is the ability to evaluate and check in on our practice without supervising ourselves, without having a managerial feeling of "you're not doing it right," or "you should be doing it differently."

It's helpful to remember what brings us to practice. A number of years ago, people would find their way here to the Insight Meditation Center because they had taken a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course and were learning mindfulness to reduce stress. They came here with a different orientation and expectations for what they wanted from practice. Now, it's more likely that people find their way here through an app or a podcast. But whatever it was that brought you here into a meditation practice, what were you hoping to get out of it? What matters to you about meditation?

It's also true that what brought us here initially isn't necessarily the reason why we continue. Honestly, I'm not sure I could say exactly what brought me to meditation. If I had to say, I heard somebody talk about meditation, and the way they were talking about the practice touched me deeply in a way I didn't really understand. It felt like, "Wow, what is that?" I just felt something stir inside me. At that time, I just Googled "meditation." [Laughter] That's what we all do, right? And I found myself establishing a meditation practice.

What matters to us now may be different from what mattered when we first began. But it can be helpful to have an orientation towards what is important to us. This aspiration doesn't have to be grand. It doesn't have to sound spiritual or Buddhist. Maybe you just want to have less reactivity. Maybe you notice that when someone says something critical or something you don't agree with, you get defensive very quickly and find yourself either closing off or saying things you later regret. You might feel, "I don't really want to keep doing this in my life. I want to have more ease and openness to meet whatever is arising, and not feel like I have to avoid people who are critical or have different views."

Or maybe you've noticed that your focus is not what it used to be, or you feel like you don't have any focus at all. This is pretty common, right? We've created this internet which is all about not having focus, but rather chasing after the next titillating tidbit. Maybe you feel it would be really helpful to have more focus.

Or maybe you've noticed that when an unpleasant or uncomfortable experience arises, a little bit of anger shows up, and you immediately orient your whole life around trying to make it stop. You feel exhausted trying to make all these uncomfortable experiences stop. Or maybe you came to meditation because you touched into something that moved you, and you'd like to touch into it again. There's a sense that what is possible here is more aligned with the life you want to live.

For whatever reason you have a meditation practice, or whatever brought you to a meditation center on a Monday night, it can be helpful to have an orientation—a direction we feel we're going. Because if we don't have a sense of what matters and where we're going, we could find ourselves unknowingly cultivating qualities that don't help us have the best life we can have. We might be reinforcing habits of mind and patterns that aren't supporting freedom.

For example, we might say, "I have this practice. I just meditate. I'm just doing mindfulness of breathing." After all, that is often what I am teaching. But what might actually be happening is that you are trying so hard to make the heart and the mind calm down. There is this pushing and striving that you aren't even noticing. This pushing and striving might be helpful in some areas of our life, but not all areas. It's common to take something that works in one area and apply it to other areas of our life. Pushing and striving doesn't help with meditation. Consistent effort does, but that is different than pushing. Knowing the difference is part of the art of practice.

Or we may say, "I'm practicing being with whatever is arising in the present moment. I'm practicing acceptance and allowing." But what we might not be noticing is that we are unknowingly cultivating waiting until this uncomfortable thing ends. We check out until the uncomfortableness ends, thinking, "When it gets pleasant, then I'll check back in." Sometimes we never get around to checking back in and getting connected with what's really happening in our life.

We might think we're practicing open awareness, but maybe we are cultivating chastising ourselves: "Dang it, I'm lost in thought again. What's happening here?"

This is where honest reflection can be helpful. The question is not, "Am I doing this right?" or "Is this correct? Do I really know what I'm doing?" The question is, "What is being cultivated with this practice?" It might be ease and relaxation, but that might not be what's important for you. Finding more freedom might be more important. Sometimes simply seeing this discrepancy

between "Am I doing it right?" and "What is being cultivated?" can be enough to make a difference. We might have been mechanically meditating, trying to measure ourselves against what a teacher, book, or podcast said. But can the question be, "What is being cultivated right now?"

Not every pleasant meditation is helpful, and not every uncomfortable meditation is unhelpful. A peaceful sit where there is a certain amount of ease can still involve a lot of resistance against all the non-peacefulness that's there. I think about a time I was on a long retreat. The center had a main meditation hall holding over a hundred people, and an auxiliary meditation room. I liked being in that little room. I got into a groove where I was doing long sits day after day. I thought, "Wow, look at me, I'm sitting for so long." But what I didn't notice was how much striving and pushing there was, and how much there was this quiet attitude of, "Get away from me. Don't you see that I'm trying to get quiet here?" I was saying this about every sound and every experience. There was resistance and a little bit of anger towards everything. I was able to sit quietly, but I was cultivating a terrible resistance that felt very fragile. I was cultivating the idea of, "Look how long I can sit," which was not helpful at all. When I finally confessed what was happening to the teacher, she told me to go sit in the main meditation hall. That was exactly what was needed.

Even though we might feel peacefulness or the ability to sit for a long time, getting there might involve habits that aren't helpful. On the other hand, an uncomfortable sit can involve deep honesty. We might admit, "Yeah, this is tough, and actually I wish I weren't meditating right now." It can be really helpful just to acknowledge what's actually happening. An uncomfortable session can cultivate patience. You might think, "I really want the bell to ring, but I'm going to just stay here." The mind will often keep saying, "I really want that bell to ring." But can we be patient even when there is impatience?

Rather than evaluating our meditation practice based on whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, it's helpful to check in with ease: "Does it feel like this is going in the direction I want it to go?"

This is the instruction the Buddha gave to his son, Rahula[3]. The Buddha asked Rahula, "What is the purpose of a mirror?" Rahula answered, "It's for a reflection." In Pali[4], the word for reflection has the same dual meaning as it does in English. It means to see oneself, but it also means to consider, contemplate, inquire, or be aware of. The Buddha told his son, "In the same way, reflect before, during, and after your actions, and before, during, and after meditation. Did that lead to more suffering or less suffering?"

Whatever brought us to practice probably falls under the desire for less suffering. We didn't knowingly start a meditation practice to suffer more. In the short term, practice might actually feel like more suffering because it can be difficult. This isn't a bug; it's a feature of meditation

practice. If we set a timer and discomfort arises—discomfort that feels tolerable but uncomfortable—just being with that discomfort is a tremendous support for our life and our practice. This could be bodily discomfort, like in the knee or the back, or just being with emotions, boredom, or doubt about what we're doing.

When I ask if it's leading to more or less suffering, I'm not talking about that exact moment. More discomfort doesn't mean a practice isn't helpful. We know this whenever we learn something new. The reflection isn't about whether it made us feel better at that moment. The reflection is: "Is it oriented towards what brought me to practice in the first place? Is it helping me be less entangled, less reactive, less cut off from myself, and less concerned with what everybody thinks about me? Is it supporting clarity and compassion?"

There's a difference between checking in and keeping tabs. Keeping tabs on oneself is making sure you know every moment what's happening and where you are. But checking in is part of the art of practice: having some curiosity about what's arising and a gentle inquiry about whether what's being cultivated is helping us move in a meaningful direction. We don't need a running assessment of our meditation practice. We just need some honesty, some interest, and periodic checking in.

Like the astute and competent cook who looks to see what the boss likes, can we periodically check if our practice is going in a direction that helps us find more peace and ease? The balance is to care enough about our practice to periodically look, learn enough about what's happening to adjust our practice if needed, and then allow ourselves to just begin again, one moment at a time.

I think I'll stop there and open it up to see if there are comments or questions. Thank you.

Q&A

Questioner 1: I find that when I do a specific practice consistently, it changes how I experience the world, often in pleasant ways. Observing how practice changes my experience motivates me to practice more. But I also observe that those pleasant experiences are something that is possible to get attached to. Do you have any advice on balancing motivation derived from pleasantness with avoiding attachment to it?

Diana Clark: I would say that if there are really pleasant experiences, it's human nature to get attached to them. We just do. Often we have this feeling of, "Oh, I shouldn't." But if you stay with this attachment and the feeling of, "I really want to have that pleasant experience again," you start to see the suffering in wanting to have a particular experience. Then, when it's not pleasant, there is disappointment. The way is to just notice the suffering that's associated with the attachment, and then the attachment will naturally fall away. Rather than saying, "I shouldn't be attached"—of course we're attached!

The second thing I'll say is that sometimes—and this is part of the art of practice—having pleasant experiences can be really helpful. Maybe our nervous system is really out of sorts, and pleasant experiences help the nervous system calm down, allowing healing and ease in the heart and mind. Having pleasant experiences can actually be beneficial, instead of this feeling of, "Oh no, I shouldn't have any attachment to things like that."

Questioner 2: It sounded like you're curious as to why we meditate. **Diana Clark:** Yeah. It can be helpful for all of us to know for ourselves why we meditate. **Questioner 2:** Well, I meditate mostly to calm myself down. There's music, which is really good—classical or jazz—but I really need to be calmed. I guess I get too stressed about stuff. **Diana Clark:** And do you find that meditation has helped you have more calmness in your life? **Questioner 2:** Oh, absolutely. Yeah. **Diana Clark:** Fantastic. And you talked about being stressed out. Do you feel like you're less stressed out when you meditate? **Questioner 2:** Well, after, of course. Yes. **Diana Clark:** Great. I'm happy to hear it.

Questioner 3: I first started meditating because my mom dragged me to the local meditation group. So, that's why I'm here. [Laughter] **Diana Clark:** But she didn't drag you today? **Questioner 3:** No, she didn't drag me today. That was more like 20 years ago. But I'm still doing it. **Diana Clark:** Nice.

Okay, wishing you a wonderful rest of the evening and safe travels home. Thank you.

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1. **Pali Canon:** The standard collection of scriptures in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, preserved in the Pali language. ↩
2. **Sutta:** A Pali word meaning discourse or sermon, referring to the teachings of the Buddha or his close disciples. ↩
3. **Rahula:** The only son of Gotama, the person who became the Buddha. He later became a monk and one of the Buddha's disciples. ↩
4. **Pali:** The ancient language in which the early Buddhist texts of the Theravada tradition were recorded. ↩

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Additional transcripts and links to YouTube videos at Moonpointing.com with deep bows of appreciation to Dan Murphy.

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