Stimulus and Response

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Welcome, Gil. Thank you, thank you, Daniel. Am I loud enough for you all?

So, I would like for this talk today to bring together a few things that I've been reflecting on this week, and to offer a kind of common thread through them. I'd like to evoke the difference between stimulus and response. This is a fairly common idea. Many of you have heard of this, and sometimes it gets emphasized as a key part of mindfulness: the ability to see the distinction between a stimulus that we have and a response to it.

And we sometimes, in this regard, distinguish between response and reactivity. Whereas reactivity is where there's no space between the stimulus and the response. There's no choice. There's an automatic reaction. The automatic something is activated, kind of automatically, or habitually, or unintentionally, where our conscious mind hasn't chosen to do that.

There's no deliberation. Maybe we are aware of doing it while we're doing it, or sometimes afterwards. And sometimes we make mistakes because of that. I've had situations where I had an inner reaction to someone, to something, and thought that I would maybe do something like give them a piece of my mind, or at least have that thought.

And then I looked at who it was, and something about the nature of the person, everything dissolved right away. Because maybe the person who bumped me in a very aggressive way—that just was, you know, how could anybody do that? And, you know, these are terrible people here. That was the reaction, is judgment right away. And I turn around, look, and it's a person who's blind, who maybe is even lost, and immediately everything dissolves.

There were, many years ago, a child who was behaving on the side of the road in a neighborhood, out on his lawn, in a way that was kind of unacceptable. Cars driving by, including mine. And then I learned that the person had severe mental challenges of certain kinds, and

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that it wasn't really a choice, and part of this person who was struggling and trying to find out how to be in this world. And so my feelings immediately dissolved, you know.

And so maybe everyone has causes and conditions for how unusually they behave. We don't know the background of people. We don't know what they've been through in their life, their current challenges. We don't know if their spouse just died, and they're on the edge of what they're capable of, and so they maybe are a little short in their words. And if you don't know that, you think, “Well, this is a terrible person.”

But stimulus and response—to be able to wait a little bit, to have some space, to be mindful. And so mindfulness is that space between the stimulus and the response, or the stillness, or the thoughtfulness, or the silence, or somehow a gap that allows us to then respond with understanding. Respond with a clear choice. “Oh, this—this I stand behind. This way of speaking, this way of relating to someone, I completely can see myself doing.”

“This one, I don't know if this is what I want to do. It's coming with a lot of authority, coming with a lot of power. And who am I to stand away, stand behind, stand and get in the way of my power and this inner authority? That's me, right?” No, maybe you don't know what the situation is like.

I've made mistakes in my life of saying things too quickly without taking time to find out what was going on. And, I mean, I've said this. This example still carries with me as a reminder. I've talked about this here. Many, many years ago, I was at work, and the shifts were changing.

And a friend came in for his shift, and we were good friends. So I immediately kind of started joking with my friend. And I hadn't taken the time—it wouldn't have taken long—to have just looked at him a little bit more carefully. One of his best friends had just died some hours before, and he was kind of in shock.

He was still coming to work, and here I was, you know, kind of being playful with him in a way that wasn't the right way to be. And I felt very bad about myself, or bad about what I had done. And that was a real lesson: to stop, wait, take time to really feel what's there, what's going on.

So that's part of the power of mindfulness, is to give us that little gap, to give us that little space, or to give us the ability to take in the wider picture of what's happening, so we're not on automatic pilot, so the reactivity is not there. And what often happens is, the less we're reactive, and the more space we allow, it allows for a lot of wisdom to arise. It allows for a lot of discovery to happen. “What's really happening here? What's really going on?” And we make fewer mistakes.

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And that's true in the privacy of our own mind as well. There, you get away with a lot of things. And maybe we're not paying attention to what's really going on, and what we're thinking and saying and doing in our minds, you know, in our fantasy. But there too, if there's a space between stimulus and response, we have the ability to see what's going on there.

"Do I really want to have this fantasy? Do I really want to imagine this now or think about this now? Is this really what I stand behind? Is this really what I feel has integrity, or who I want to be?" How can you ask that question? Of course, it's who you are. You're thinking it, so who else is it going to be?

It's ready to defend anything and everything. But no, are you your thoughts? You don't have to be your thoughts. Thoughts are thoughts. You don't have to go along with them.

So this amazing ability to question and look and stop and have more choice is a big part of what mindfulness is. So there's two areas that have come up in the last week. One was, I teach a chaplaincy program here through the *Satya Center*. We met here in the meditation hall on Friday for our session.

And I adapted a kind of thing that I've often enough taught there: that in a chaplaincy setting, it might be possible to organize a chaplain, someone who's going to show up for someone, who's going to offer spiritual care, into four phases of how a chaplain does. So, kind of how the chaplain might organize themselves and the visit they have with someone to offer spiritual care. And so each of these steps kind of implies that there's space, there's time for something deeper to happen, and to discover.

So the first is, a chaplain, when they see someone for the first time, go to see someone wherever they're going—see them in the hospital or hospice or jails or prisons. Chaplains operate in many places. The first step is to not know. To recognize, "There's a lot I don't know here. I don't know about this person. I don't know about the situation."

You know, I've heard something about them, and I have some sense of what the story is, but I really don't know so much. Let me remember not knowing. And this makes a lot of space for a gap, for discovery, for not being on automatic pilot with the responses and what we do. And so, just not to know, and actually put aside things you have learned.

If someone is in a hospital room because of an automobile accident, that chaplain doesn't go in and automatically say, "Well, that was terrible to have an automobile accident." That would mean you're already coming with an idea. But rather, you go and say, "Hi, you know, I'm here to check on you. I'm from spiritual care. Anything you need, or..." Just very open-ended, and let them say.

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And they might say that accident is the last thing on their mind. They might say, “My child is graduating from high school today, and I won't be able to be there.” Okay, now we're in a different world. It's not about the accident. It's about this important milestone in the family life that has now been disrupted.

So this not knowing starts there. Not knowing, “What is this? Who is this?” And it might be with a friend you've known for a long time. You know them really well, but who knows where they are today, what's happening? So to have some sense: let's find out.

And that's the next step of a chaplaincy visit: to discover. For the chaplain to find out, “Who is this person, and what's important for them, and what do they want to talk about, and what do they want to show?” And just to discover. And a good chaplain asks nice questions: questions that are connecting questions, opening questions, questions that are not probing questions, not assertive questions, not rhetorical questions, not questions that are really advice.

“Have you thought about meditation?” But just very, very simple questions that allow someone to reveal and show, in the way they like, without any expectations or demand. And some people are very happy to talk about themselves, and if they ask some simple questions, “Oh, tell me more. Oh, that must be hard. Oh, that must be hard not to be able to go to your child's graduation.”

So it's just a very simple statement, and then they're ready to say more. And so you listen, and you're discovering. The third step of a chaplaincy visit is the chaplain might offer something. What's the offering that chaplain might make?

And for some religious people, chaplains pray. Buddhist chaplains usually don't pray, except unless someone asks them for a prayer. Some Buddhists are like, “What? I have to pray?” But yes, that's what people want. That's what they need.

And prayer is a beautiful thing to do for people. The associations people have with what prayer is are usually too narrow. Prayer is just a sacred way of speaking to people, sacred words—words that are evocative, meaningful, touching values and purposes, and things that really touch the heart in a deep way.

But, you know, it might be that you say, “You know, I see that you're really anxious about the surgery you're going to, and would you like to do a little exercise with the breathing that maybe might calm you and prepare you for surgery?” That might be the offering. It might be that someone is dying, and you say, “Would you like me to call your estranged child you haven't talked to in ten years, and let them know that you're here?”

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So there's all kinds of things that a chaplain might offer to do, but there's the offering: that they support someone, to guide someone, to support them, and help bring forth their own wisdom, their own inner resources. Chaplains usually are trying to serve people, not fix people. In the world of chaplains, sometimes they talk about serving, not helping, even. Helping is a little bit too much, but serving means you really respect the wholeness of the person.

And how can you help that wholeness to come forth? And their purpose, their meaning, what's important for them to come forth, and you want to support that. So there's not knowing, the discovery, and then some kind of offering. And then there is bringing it to an end.

Saying goodbye and bringing it to an end can be a very important time. That might be a time where there's a trust developed, there's a connection that's developed, that can allow for something deeper to happen. Like even a thank you for the visit from the chaplain might be very significant for someone to hear. They feel respected; their dignity is preserved or enhanced.

It might be that the chaplain says how nice it is to be there with them, or might say, “Oh, may it be that the calmness you did from this breathing exercise, may you stay close to that for the next half an hour as you get ready to go. And it's nice to see you, and thank you.” So there's the ending of it. So chaplains are careful about this.

So the reason I'm telling you this is because I just taught it. So it's on my mind. You got to deal with what's on my mind. But also, this is a kind of—each of these steps happens in that gap between stimulus and response. There's a lot of space, a lot of gap, a lot of time.

Find out what's here, what's going on, and what might the response be. And the other thing on my mind is how that goes on in our own minds for ourselves. And partly, I was kind of marveling at my own mind in that place of a gap between stimulus and response.

So one of my favorite metaphors, or similes, from the ancient texts is that of a puppeteer. That somehow the mind is a puppeteer and has all these strings to the puppet. And the mind, the puppeteer, pulls the strings, and the arms and legs move, and things go on. So there's like strings from our thinking mind to our body.

And you start having thoughts that are frightening, and the belly pulls in. You might have thoughts of anger, and your fist tightens up. You might have thoughts of being perplexed, and your forehead kind of bunches all up, kind of confused. There's all these little things.

And sometimes it's not actually muscle so much, but it's more like some place gets activated. We have certain thoughts we're involved in, and could feel parts of the body getting activated

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now. And the more still and quiet you are—and this is one of the advantages of meditation—the more we can feel the impact the puppeteer has on us, the way that these strings go down, and what gets activated and moved, and where there's an impulse, an impulse to respond or to react.

It might be in the legs to run. It might be in the muscles of the upper arm to tighten up and get ready to fight. There might be all kinds of things that go on. It might be excitement. It might be anticipation. It might be fear and worry, but they all kind of have an expression in the body.

And it's possible to have those thoughts, whatever they might be, see them clearly, and the strings have fallen off. There's no strings anymore. Maybe they've been cut. And you really feel that there's no strings attached to the thoughts. They're just thoughts, and they're not going anywhere.

They're not tugging on something. They're just thoughts that are kind of there. And there's a freedom. Our body is free right now. Something about my inner life has a freedom, has a gap, has a pause, has a spaciousness, a stillness, where those thoughts don't reach in and affect me.

Where I have a thought, it's just a thought. The thought is seen clearly. The thought is seen as a thought. And one of the great aspects of mindfulness practice is to be able to see a thought arise when it arises, when it's occurring, and to be so clear. “Oh, it's just a thought happening.”

And now it goes, because there's no strings. When there are strings attached to thoughts, they tend to stay. It's almost like there's a two-way string. There's a puppeteer in the mind, and then there's the puppeteer in the body, and they're tugging back and forth on each other. And it kind of goes on, and it builds and escalates sometimes.

But when there's no strings, no attachment, no clinging, no automatic kind of stimulus-response going on, and just a thought—no reaction to it, no participation in it—nothing is tugged, nothing happens. “Oh, just a thought happens.” And it's such a delight to see that.

And I had all this delight this week, kind of just like, “Oh yeah, this is kind of cool. There's just these thoughts. They come and they go. They're seen very clearly, and, you know, I'm free. Thank you.” Just seeing it. This is how it is.

So the stimulus-response and the gap between it, and the space, the silence, the having the bigger picture. And it doesn't have to be called the gap. It doesn't have to be called space.

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It's many, many things that could be. It could be a sense of stillness. It could be a sense of great spaciousness, wide awareness.

That kind of space for all of it, so that something happens and it's seen within that spaciousness. So, you know, no response. If someone you know is a little bit too, I don't know, breathing really heavy and huffing and puffing, and somehow something is not comfortable for you because you're in a small little elevator with them, and they're kind of up against your body, squeezed in because there are so many. It's like, “Give me...” You know, they're a little bit troublesome.

But if the person is in a large, large sports theater, sports arena, and they're on the bleachers on the other side of the field, you know, it's easy to kind of love humanity. So the same thing with the mind. If the mind has lots of space in it, it's easy to love your thoughts, or love the unusual things you have. It's when you're claustrophobic with them that even our own thoughts can be difficult.

So to have the space, to have the spaciousness, to have the stillness, to have the silence. And so now we come to the last thing that's been in my mind this week, that kind of makes really a core Buddhist teaching around all this. There is, in Buddhism, as we know, the practice of mindfulness.

And there's the ordinary practice of mindfulness that anybody can learn relatively quickly and easily. Sometimes it's said that mindfulness is easy. What's difficult is remembering to do it. So simple ideas can, you know, be easy enough.

And we now have secular mindfulness. We have mindfulness that's spread through our society and used in many, many, many environments without any reference to Buddhism. And that's very nice. Recently, I was invited to teach a wonderful bunch of Jewish rabbis. I think they were all rabbis, for a Jewish organization that has been given mindfulness, Buddhist mindfulness, for them to make it into Jewish mindfulness.

To take the ideas, the principles of it, and bring forth their Jewish spirituality in the midst of mindfulness. And they're now training retreat teachers—people to teach this on retreat like we do. And because I'm kind of, you know, a retreat teacher, and one of the rabbis had come to IRC and sat with us there, and was a wonderful man and sincere practitioner, they asked if I would come and talk to them a little bit about mindfulness and retreat teaching and all that.

And it was such a wonderful privilege to be in this wonderful spiritual circle of people and their spirituality, their Jewish spirituality, kind of exploring the uses of mindfulness for what

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their religion is about. So mindfulness is here in all kinds of different ways, and it's kind of exciting.

In the Buddhist context, there are kind of two large phases of mindfulness that we can understand. So one is the ordinary one that's for beginners, people who practice and are learning what it is. At some point, as the practice matures, there's enough gap, space, pause, stillness between stimulus and response that the mindfulness practitioners see something very meaningful, very important.

And the seeing of something important, then in the ancient texts they say what they see there, what they experience there in that gap, becomes the basis for doing mindfulness. It becomes the orientation or the reference point for doing the mindfulness practice. So the reference point now becomes something different than just, “I'm just being mindful. Thank you.” There's something else that's supporting it here.

And in the ancient language, there's three primary things that it says become the foundation, or the basis, the reference point for doing mindfulness, the support for doing mindfulness. Mindfulness is informed by these things. So I'll give you my modern rendering of these words first, because the ancient language and how it's translated in English—it's very hard to translate words from 2,500 years ago, from a very different language and culture, and to be able to catch the nuances, the richness of it, or the association of it.

And I mean, just like if a modern-day all-American person went back to Indian time of the Buddha and said, “You know, I miss apple pie,” I mean, that's not, “Oh, he's going to go, okay.” But apple pie represents so much in the United States for some people. It's like, for some people, it's America. And so, you know, it evokes so much.

And the same thing with these words. It's very hard to understand. So I'll first do the English rendering that makes it inspiring, I hope, and then I'll give you the ancient way. So mindfulness, at some point, when the stimulus and response are wide enough apart before a response, we can see something there.

There's three things: there's seeing independence, which is all-American; a sense of independence; a sense of freedom, which is also all-American, like apple pie; and a sense of peace. Is that all-American? So, independence, freedom, and peace.

Independence means that the strings are severed. The puppeteer is no longer running the show and keeping you doing what you don't choose to do, and you're not on automatic anymore. There's a feeling now that you've really been separated from clinging, attachments,

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automatic pilot. There is no longer preoccupation. There's no longer this being automatically swept along with emotions and feelings.

You have everything. It might be the same. You might have emotions. You might have thoughts. You might even have attachments, but there's a sense of, “No, I'm no longer—I’m separated from it.”

There's something in me, in the mindfulness, that now is independent from it. Awareness has become independent. “I see it, but I'm not it. I see it, but I'm not. I have a choice whether or not to participate in it.” So something within us—and in Buddhism, it wouldn't be you exactly—but something within us, you see, in that gap between stimulus and response, we see there where there is an independence.

Something is not dependent. And classically in Buddhism, this word in English, in America, “independence,” of course, is the whole thing. But more technically in Buddhism, we wouldn't use the word “independence.” We would use the words “not dependent.” And “independence” seems to kind of give a license for, “Do whatever you want.”

But not dependent means that you are not being defined by anything. You're not being run by anything. You're not being controlled by something, and the puppeteer no longer has a job with you. And so, a sense of independence.

So in that practice of mindfulness, that sense of independence is right there as a support or as part of the mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is operating in a clear sense: as I'm aware, there's an independence. I'm aware of everything, but I'm not attached to it. I'm not tied to it.

The second is freedom. Not only am I independent, but now there's something that's no longer here. I'm free—not to do whatever I want, but in Buddhism it's freedom from things that I was caught by before, I was trapped by before, that had controlled me before. And this is a freedom from craving, clinging, addictions, freedom from.

And that spills over: freedom from certain kinds of fear that are attachment-based, clinging-based; certain kinds of anger, hostility, which also are clinging-based, where we're not free. So that we see this freedom operating. “Oh, those things that kept me entangled before are no longer here, or they're no longer here in a way that I'm caught by it. I'm free from them. They're not running the show anymore.”

Kind of like something else is in charge now. So we see there's a sense of freedom. So in the mindfulness, there's a reference point: mindfulness now being informed by a sense of

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freedom from things that you weren't free of before. And for people who are newcomers to mindfulness, they don't even know how they're not free.

That's, you know, the bad news that happens as you do mindfulness practice. It's not all good news, mindfulness, right? You start because you have to meet yourself and see yourself in a deeper and deeper way. And occasionally, for just a few of you, what you see in there is not necessarily good news. You see how you're attached and reactive and opinionated and all kinds of things.

So it's remarkable to come to this time when now you see in the mindfulness there's a freedom there as well. The third is peace. Wow. Something has stopped. The agitation has stopped. The restlessness has stopped.

The agitation has stopped. The spinning mind has stopped. The churning and worry has stopped. Something that really kept us in a state that's not peaceful has stopped enough so there's peace here too. And again, it doesn't mean that any of those things have stopped completely.

What it means is that the mindfulness, the awareness that we have of everything—in that mindfulness, in that awareness—there's a foundation of peace. We know things now calmly. We know things peacefully. We might be agitated, but we know the agitation calmly.

We might be furious and, you know, kind of like everything is spinning inside, and fury and anger, and like a volcano. Believe it or not, there is something in the mindfulness that's based on peace. We peacefully know, “Wow, I could power the California electrical grid with all this energy that's going through.” And this is quite something. That, wow.

As opposed to becoming the, you know, all the thoughts get folded into the volcano and are part of the lava that's burning everything up as it goes along. The awareness now is based on, or rooted in, this peace. So I don't know if you can get a feeling for this, but it's a radical thing that you're allowed, in a sense, to be who you are. Completely allowed to be everything you are.

Nothing needs to be denied or pushed away, but you know it now from a radically different place than you do before. You're no longer buying into it. You're no longer necessarily believing it. You're no longer participating in it. There's space. There's stillness. There's quiet.

There's freedom. Something in you feels independent from it, while you're still just who you are. Isn't that remarkable? So this is a turning point in mindfulness practice. It might take some years of doing mindfulness regularly for it to start dawning in you.

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"Wait a minute. There's something new here. I'm still mindful. I'm still doing it, but the mindfulness now has a quality to it, a characteristic to it it never had before. I can feel how, in the mindfulness, things are calm, independent, peaceful, freedom even—freedom from."

So now I'll offer you, in Buddhist English, what these three are called. So independence, freedom, and peace is evocative, I hope, for you. I mean, that's kind of like a warm-hearted thing: "Oh, good." But when we translate the Buddhist language into English, I don't think we get the same feeling.

But it might have been in ancient India, maybe even in modern India. Some of these words, I'm pretty confident, are even in modern India like apple pie—if that's the right analogy. They're actually quite inspiring for people in India in ways that we don't get in the unfortunate English translations. So: seclusion, fading away, or dispassion, and cessation.

Good. Should we go for it? Let's have more seclusion, more dispassion, and just cease—cease and desist. So it doesn't quite work in English unless we render it, we take some liberties to translate it closer to something in order to capture the emotional meaning.

Viveka is usually translated as seclusion. It more literally means separation. It's being separated from something. Seclusion means you're kind of isolated.

And then the *virāga*, that's translated as dispassion or fading away, is actually a very inspiring word in India. But it has multiple meanings. The word *rāga—vi* means separated from *rāga*, or without *rāga*. And *rāga* has two primary meanings.

There's a wordplay going on that we don't even recognize in English. And one of them is, *rāga* means something like lust. Though some people tell me I shouldn't use that in English, so they would tell me I should use passion. But in California, passion doesn't work because in California, passion represents everything that's good, you know, enthusiasm, even though it comes from the Latin word meaning to suffer. So it's a little confusing.

But *rāga* kind of means lust, and it also means a dye for coloring cloth. And so *virāga* also has the sense of the dye fading off, fading away. So the fading away of something. And so, this movement toward *virāga*, this movement toward freedom—I translate it as freedom—is not just sudden, but it's a gradual process.

Our attachments are fading away; our cravings, our clingings, our hostilities in practice fade away until such a time that we feel they're still there, but I am now free from them. There's a freedom from it. And then at some point, they stop entirely. And this full stop of agitation, full stop of worry—something in the mind has a dramatic ability to suddenly stop.

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And for practitioners, it's common. We never know when it's going to happen, but there's a stopping in the mind. Wow. That I call peace. It's just a phenomenal peace because you don't even know how active and busy and moving on and on the mind is.

And it seems like, yeah, like, what is it that has stopped? I'm still kind of thinking. I'm still feeling. I'm still alive. I'm still very aware. But something has stopped.

There's peace that kind of saturates everything. And that stopping, that peace, is also gradual. It builds over time, and the day comes when the practitioner begins to recognize these things as being very useful supports. To know, "Oh, there's a sense of freedom, independence, and peace, and that's helping me be mindful."

That makes mindfulness so much more meaningful and purposeful and valuable, more inspiring and happy to do this practice because, oh, it comes along with these other things. And in the ancient teaching where it talks about mindfulness supported by these three things, the full explanation goes like this: mindfulness supported by independence, freedom, and peace, leading to—

So I'll give you the most common English translation. Put you on the edge of your seats, or I'll stop now. So, cliffhanger for next week. Where does it lead to? Where do this independence, freedom, and peace possibly lead?

Well, then you have to deal with Buddhist English because these words are usually not very inspiring. So anyway, the usual translation is relinquishment. Thank you. Relinquishment.

So the Pāli word for it is fascinating because it has two meanings, just like *virāga* has two meanings. This one has two meanings: *paṭinissagga*. And it means giving, and it means letting go. Why does it have two meanings? Well, I don't know.

You have to, in context, read the text and see in context which one it is. But you don't get relinquishment if that means giving. It means giving it up or having to hand it over to someone because you have no choice. "I have to relinquish that." But giving can be beautiful. Generosity is voluntary, and a beautiful thing to do.

And so the letting go—I like to say these two ideas are supposed to be held together. There's a profound letting go, but that letting go feels like it's as wonderful as a gift that's given away. We're giving away something profound. We're giving away all that obstructs our lives, but we're not rejecting it. We're not attacking it. We're not throwing it away.

"See here, I let it go freely, generously." What a great movement. Let it go. Give it. Give it away.

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And maybe it even has a sense that we give it away for the benefit of others. Not to give everybody else our challenges, our attachments, but rather we give this away so that the best of who we are can meet other people. That we can meet people without any obstacles to our love, our care, our respect, our ability to listen to them and hear them, our ability to be a chaplain for them, to show up.

With not knowing, let's discover. To discover what's here. To show up now that we're here, and I know this, my friend. What can I offer? How can I be with my friend in a way that's really wonderful and supportive and enlivening and meaningful and generous?

And then how can we say goodbye that expresses how much value we have, and care, and love? So all that is found in the simple distinction between stimulus and response. Isn't that nice? So when you hear someone talk about that stimulus-response thing, you'll be inspired. You know now how great it is.

So those are my thoughts, and thank you very much for being here. And I'm going off this afternoon to IRC for another retreat. I'll be back in two weeks, when we have a potluck, which is always nice. And so, travel well.

And for those of you who want to take a little bit of time to be here today and talk to your neighbor, you're welcome to say hello and check in, or check in about the talk. And otherwise, thank you.

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