Friday dharma talk and guided meditation

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There are many different instructions for doing mindfulness meditation, and among Asian Buddhist teachers, there are many different ways of doing it. Western teachers teach different ways, and we have our way here at IRC, and they're all kind of pointing to the same thing, leading to the same place. It's just different ways of beginning.

But if we go back and look at how the Buddha taught mindfulness, he taught it one way for people who were new, and one way for people who were mature in their practice. So the practice is the same, both ways. So, if you get to be a mature practitioner practicing for a long time, it's the same practice. So, if you're doing that IRC practice that we do here, guess what? What, you know? People ask, "What's next?"

You know, okay, I've got the basics now. Tell me the advanced. It's still the same practice, but there is a difference. The difference is that, as people mature in this practice, there starts to be a reference point for the practice.

In the translations of the texts, they say that now the practice is based on something. In the ancient texts, they talk about three things. But at some point, something begins being available: the mindfulness is not nothing, but it's mindfulness that's rooted in something, or connected to something, or informed by something.

And so, in a way, this is the way that this retreat is organized. We talked about mindfulness of breathing, body, emotions, thoughts, and we gave it more attention at this retreat than most retreats because the first three *dharma* talks were body, emotions, and thinking. Yesterday, Matthew's talk was on stillness, and today's talk is on space, spaciousness. Tomorrow's talk will be on silence.

And this is our kind of variation of what the Buddha was teaching: that at some point, the practice is informed by something. It can be informed by stillness, by a stopping, by a rest.

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It can be informed by the space that's here. It can be informed by the stillness. Still, the mindfulness is the same, but it's informed by it.

So, what does that mean? How does that work? It's probably fair to say that for most of us, most of the time, our minds are concerned with something. If we're thinking, it's usually, we can say, we're thinking about something. Very few people think without there being a subject of their thoughts.

Some concern, something it's about, something they can describe. It's almost like the mind has been constructed partly to be concerned about things, so we can find our way in the world and plan and know things and figure things out. But sometimes that's all the mind knows. It only knows to be thinking about things, to be focusing on things, to be looking at things, to be paying attention to things. There's always a subject.

If we're lucky enough to be aware, there is a subject of the awareness. Some people are highly vigilant, and so they're constantly looking around. They're seeing, "Is it safe here? Is it dangerous here?" And their mind is constantly searching.

Some people have a lot of desires, and so they're looking for, "What can I get here?" Some people have a lot of aversion. They see the world through a lens: "What's wrong here? What's wrong?" Some people have all of the above.

So then, you know, it's kind of fortunate because you have a lot to do. You'll never get bored. And so there's always some subject of attention, subject of the thoughts. You can maybe say there's a subject for most emotions, too.

Sometimes we have emotions that we don't know why are there; they just bubble up. But they're usually about something, and the mind can be on rapid fire from one about-thing to another about-thing: one thought, one concern, one activity, the next.

What represents that for me is a few times in my life when I've surfed the web—click, click, click, click—and then, when I stopped, to close the computer, I could find my mind was still doing that, jumping around, like wanting the next. It was kind of crazy to see that the habit of being on the computer affected the habit of the mind, how it continued after being on the screen.

And sometimes there are powerful forces in us that are driving the mind that is concerned about something. There can be fear that keeps us always engaged and concerned and worried, and looking and thinking and figuring out and predicting. And so it's always about safety, we could say. Sometimes it's about what we're angry at, resentful.

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So there's all kinds of things that it's about. And it can be rapid fire. It can be quick. It can be very aggressive. It can be like the mind is really tight and straining and contracted.

And sometimes, though, you can feel that the mind gets very claustrophobic, very small. The world of the mind gets small and tight around some concern. And then sometimes you're lucky enough to go on retreat, and maybe it takes four days, and the mind relaxes. It feels like the mind has gotten spacious, it's gotten open, it's gotten bigger and more expansive, and not so lost in a particular concern and mulling it over, ruminating, chewing its cud over and over again.

And so many people live in a world of aboutness. That's what they live in: their thoughts, their focus, their attention. It's always about something. And my proposal is that a world of aboutness is a little bit separated from the real world, from the lived world.

The world of aboutness is kind of a virtual world that we live in, a virtual world that can feel more real than the real world, more solid than the real world, more interesting, more important than actually what we can see and touch and, you know, experience with our body and the world that we're living in here and now.

So mindfulness is usually understood to be mindful of what your experience is. So, you know, we've added to the repertoire of things you can be concerned with by telling you to be aware of your breathing. Thank you. Now your focus is also in the body, and then mindfulness of your emotions, mindfulness of thinking.

As if you already don't have enough things to be concerned about, and now we're giving you more. And so mindfulness can be seen as just—and some people talk very much about certain forms of mindfulness that are object-focused mindfulness—you really have to penetrate the object of attention. That's the art of it.

But at some point, there's a different reference point where we're no longer being informed by or guided by the preoccupation with the world of aboutness, the world of concerns. We start seeing there's another reference point for how to live and how to be. And there's a variety of these things that come with practice.

It's possible to be surprised that it's possible to be calm, and the calm is not about anything. It's just a state of peace and well-being. Many years ago, there was a story of a person. A retreatee came to the teacher and said, "I'm feeling something strange. I never had this before. Can you describe it?"

The teacher said, and the person said, "No." And so the teacher said, "Well, would you study it and come back and tell me what you..." She came back for the next practice period, that

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practice session, and told the teacher, "I discovered what it is. I'm calm."

She had never been calm before. It was a new phenomenon, so she wasn't familiar with it. So the idea that we can be calm, we can be happy—there's the possibility to have one of the great, very significant experiences of meditation: to be happy or joyful for no reason.

You're just sitting here and you're minding your own business. It may be partly because of the harmony that happens, of being connected and absorbed and focused, and the product of concentration. But it's not about winning the lottery. It's not about getting some wonderful thing in the world.

It's just a state of being that arises, I can say, for no reason. And it's quite remarkable to have an experience of being alive that is independent of, or separated from, always being the concerns we have that we're gnawing at and thinking about incessantly. And it begins showing us there's another way to live. It's possible to live resting in these wonderful, wondrous states.

It's possible to rest in an experience of peace. It's possible to rest in an experience of happiness, in a state of love like *mettā*. It's possible to rest in a state of freedom. It's been said that the United States' reference point for freedom is the freedom to do.

The great freedom in America is having unlimited credit cards, and then you'll be free. No hindrances, just buy, buy, buy, buy, buy, until you go bye-bye. But the Buddhist idea of freedom is freedom from: freedom from needing to buy anything at all, freedom from believing the advertisements, freedom from being afraid that you're going to be left behind if you don't get the latest, most wonderful brand of socks.

Freedom from attachment. Freedom from fear. And you can say that's about something. It's nice to be free of fear.

But the state of freedom itself is not about anything. It's just a state of living: the unshackled heart, the heart beating, flowing, radiating freely, with nothing in its way. And so, the same thing, our whole being can kind of radiate freedom. That's not about anything, and it's quite remarkable because it doesn't mean the world has to change.

The world doesn't have to provide us with kind of anything except a little bit of food and water and things, basic things. There's not so much we need: the basic necessities. From an ordinary, maybe lay lifestyle, monastics or ascetics, because of how little they possess. But the Buddha designed monasticism so that it would not be an ascetic lifestyle.

It would be just enough to have a good life, just enough to have food to live in a healthy way,

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just enough clothing to stay warm, just enough medicine, just enough housing to, you know, stay out of the weather. So, just enough to be good.

And so this idea that to be alive, free from the world changing in radical ways or providing in radical ways, free from our desires—it's not necessarily a problem to have desires. And to be free from desires doesn't mean that we're free of desires, that there are no longer any desires. It means we have desires, but we have choice.

You say, "Look at that. Desires are a dime a dozen. Okay, not that one. I'll let it pass. I'm free." This is not an ascetic tradition, but it is a tradition that wants us to be wise and free.

And sometimes we have to learn to be very wise about our desires. Sometimes it's impossible to fulfill desires that are considered appropriate, healthy. Our society tells us this is what we should do, or that we wanted to do it, but we're sick, injured, and it's just not accessible. There might be grieving that has to go on for what's lost.

But if we're grieving unfulfilled desires and the desires persist, it will be eternal grieving. If there are desires we can't fulfill, we'll always be frustrated, pushing that desire, wanting it to be a certain way. And so it's a real challenge sometimes to negotiate desires that seem reasonable, but they can't be lived.

So what would we rather be? We'd rather be free than caught by the desires. Rather have our peace than feel the turmoil of wanting and wanting and wanting. And some people, that's all they know, is to want.

And that's the world of aboutness. The world of not wanting, of being free, that's a world where we're not abouts of, and that becomes a reference point. Wow, this is what freedom is. How can I be mindful with that freedom?

How can I be mindful so the mindfulness itself isn't a continuation of wanting or not wanting or being afraid? It's so easy that the very act of mindfulness brings along with it a strong desire for something, and so we're being mindful with that strong desire. Or it could be aversion. We're trying to get away from something, or we're going to blast something out of existence.

I used to, in some of the longer retreats I had, practice the wonderful subtle art of using the mind's bazooka to try to blast my pain away, or something I didn't like away. Just like, "I'm just gonna, I'm gonna zero in on it and just focus on it. So I'm gonna incinerate it." Remember, I was young. I was young when I started practicing, so that was a little bit reckless, foolish.

But I realized after a while, the great thing about doing long retreats, even if you're a slow

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learner like I am, you eventually learn that this doesn't work. This doesn't work. So sooner or later, I put my bazooka down because I saw it doesn't work. Nice.

And so, to be mindful not with the desires and greed, not with the aversions and hatreds, not with fear and dread, but to be mindful freely, calmly, peacefully. To be mindful without trying to accomplish something. But just to discover the experience of what it's like to be aware, and in the very awareness there's freedom.

There's freedom. In the very awareness, there's calm, calm awareness, calm mindfulness. So we start having these reference points for how to be mindful. It supports the mindfulness.

And Matthew talked yesterday about stillness as being one of those supports. And there's more stillness that's available than we realize. We're often looking; the mind is often moving so fast that we don't see that actually there's peace here or stillness here. And can it be some way that that stillness feels sweet?

That stillness, that stillness feels nourishing, appropriate refuge, so that when we're being mindful, the mindfulness shares in that stillness. To be mindful with an unmoving mind. One of the remarkable things about awareness and metaphors—we use these crazy metaphors, and then we think that's how it works.

"My mind wandered away." Did it? It doesn't wander away, and then we bring it back. Some of us jerk it back. You bring it back. It didn't go anywhere at all.

And then we have, you know, "Focus your mind. Okay, lock, zero in on something," as if, you know. But the mind is always here. It doesn't come and go. It's here.

There's no need in mindfulness practice to bring the mind back. The mind never goes away. You can just wake up to how it is now, and then everything is here. You don't have to be jerking. You don't have to be moving the mind.

It's possible to be phenomenally aware, panoramically aware, or quietly aware without the mind moving. And without the mind being frozen and tight, it's just very soft and very happy to be quiet and still and aware. Maybe it feels like the mind is not going out anymore. We say the mind goes out to be aware of something, but the mind doesn't have to go out.

It doesn't have to go in. It doesn't have to move. It just takes it in. The unmoving mind, the still mind.

So today it's spaciousness, space. And this is a very interesting area with the world of aboutness, because in many situations we're in physical spaces, we sometimes are more concerned with the objects in the room than we are with the space. And so you might be

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more concerned with the people, the objects of things here, than you are with the space between everybody, between the floor and the ceiling.

This is a relatively high ceiling. That creates a very nice ambiance for meditation. That would not happen if the ceiling was really low. If it was an eight-foot ceiling, just eight feet up, so I could reach up and tap it, I think we would feel claustrophobic in here.

But it's kind of high, so the ceiling doesn't press down. There's a lot of open space, and so there's a lot of space in here. What happens if you look at the space rather than the things in the space, in the room?

One of the things, when you look at space, is that it's impossible to stare at space. Come on, I can, you know, amen, I can give really serious instruction. "Listen, you guys, stare space down. Don't let it get away. Just keep your eye on it. Don't waver your eyes at all."

I mean, it's ridiculous because it's impossible to stare at space. But you can see it, kind of. But it's nothing to see, but an absence. I hope it's the case for you, but for me, if I'm going to look at space, my eyes start floating.

It's part of why it's so nice to look at space. Especially, I like to look up sometimes, and my eyes kind of float. And I kind of don't see the walls so much and the ceiling if I look at space. But I'm not really looking at anything either.

My eyes aren't looking, kind of. I can't say my eyes are looking, but I can't say they're not looking. But the eyesight is relaxed, looking at space, looking at a drifting cloud in an empty sky.

I had so much fun doing this at ten thousand feet in the Sierra some years ago. We were on the eastern side of the Sierras, so we could see the, I guess, the moisture was coming up from the Central Valley, being pushed up there on the west side of the mountains. It was completely blue sky, endless. We were high up, and we were looking at blue sky.

You know, what are you looking at when you look at blue sky? Another place you can't stare at. So it was very nice. We had lunch. We were just sitting there looking at sky.

And then I thought it was like a miracle. This little white cloud appeared out of nothing. Wow! It's magic.

It wasn't there, and there it is. And just a little cloud is there, and wow, it's floating a little bit and it's shifting a little bit, and then it disappeared. Where did it go? Where do clouds go when they...?

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It was so much fun to watch disappearing and disappearing. And was the mind staring at it? I think it was just part of the fun. The mind was so relaxed, easy, floating with the cloud.

So sometimes space is invaluable. It gives us a whole different feeling of well-being, of freedom, of peace. That is obvious if you have the opposite. I mean, the example I give too often is if you're stuck in a small elevator with, you know, it really only fits two people, but you're in the middle of four really big, massive, just-off-the-field, dirty, sweaty football players.

You know, you're in the middle, and you're quite aware how little space there is, and claustrophobic. And who knows what kind of locker talk they're talking there in the elevator with you? Give me a break!

But then you go into this massively wonderful cathedral, or underground grotto cave, it's huge, or a big, wide meadow with rows of trees around. And the same people are there, but they're like three hundred feet away, spread out. So it's easy to love humanity now. It's easy to be relaxed.

And then the space now, the space, is really meaningful. It makes you safe. There are some psychologists who think that people tend to feel safe on little hilltops where they can see far away, because you can see danger coming. And so, if you're in the plains of Africa or something, and on a hilltop or looking out across the plain, it feels very safe.

Because there's no danger anywhere in sight, so it does something for us physiologically. Sometimes to see wide open spaces, so it's possible to have a sense of wide open spaces in awareness, sitting here quietly with eyes closed. So let's do it. I'll guide you a little bit.

So, gently closing your eyes, and gentle yourself, a gentling within. Maybe there's a very simple calming of your inside, sitting here, breathing, feeling. That's easier to do if you're not spinning and preoccupied in thoughts and ideas. Gentling yourself from the inside.

And if there is a lot of thinking, maybe you're protesting everything I've said. Maybe it's nice if you relax the thinking mind. A softening of tension in the mind, and settling into your body. And in a global way, whatever way is easy for you, check in with your body, feel it, sense it.

And within your body, there are breathing movements of breathing. And for the breathing to move, for the chest to move, the belly to move, it moves through space. The chest expands outward into space. As the torso collapses again, or contracts again in the exhale, you're giving up this extra space you took up, allowing that space around you to be there again.

There might be buzzing, humming, vibration, tingling in your body. As you breathe, might there be some inner feeling of stillness, quiet? Maybe deep inside is stillness, stillness of

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awareness. That highlights the movement of breathing.

And then, as you're sitting here, feel the space, or sense the space, beyond the edges of your body. Is the boundary between your body and the space around it a sharp line, a sharp boundary? Is it diffuse? Or is that boundary not so clear?

Does it shift and change? One of the forms of awareness that humans have is spatial awareness. There's a kind of way you can be aware of the space in this room, even with your eyes closed, because you've been in this room enough now.

You have a general sense of the direction where I sit in relationship to you, the direction from which my voice is coming, maybe. There is some inner imagination or sense of the high, the high space here with the high ceiling. And the space that's around you. Can you feel if there's a stillness in the space?

Maybe there's a softness in the space. And what might it be like to have something in your awareness rest in the space here, not straining, not holding on, but somehow nested in the space?

There's a fascinating way in that we can't quite separate space from the awareness of space. The sense of space exists together with the awareness of space. In our direct experience, they can't be separated.

Can you sense the space within your body? Maybe in your torso, between the sensations you have of your body—not your idea of the body, but the sensations of body. Is there stillness, quiet space between the sensations? Where in your torso do you feel the most space, spaciousness?

And if you bring these two together—outer space and inner space—you have a sense of continuity of space. The outer space moves into the inner space. The inner space is continuous with the outer space. There are sensations of the body, but those sensations don't have to be the only game in town.

You don't have to fixate on them or focus on them. But you can allow them to float in the sea of space. All sensations float in the ocean of space.

And is there, can you feel the space in the mind? There too, between the sensations and thoughts and ideas of the mind, beyond the edges of thinking, in the gaps between thoughts. In some sense of mind, of awareness, that's bigger than any thought you could have. Thoughts being like little clouds in an endless sky.

And is there some way, some lesson to be learned from including space and spaciousness

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with your mindfulness? Is there a way to be aware, mindfully aware, that's guided by a sense of spaciousness? Awareness that's informed by the space that's here.

You could still be aware of your breathing, your body, emotions, and thoughts. But if that awareness is allowed to include space that surrounds all things, that's in the middle of everything, is the mindfulness different?

How much are you living in the world of your thoughts, the world of aboutness? And how much can you step out of that world—not to stop it, but to hold it in this wider field of spaciousness? So you're aware of breathing, but not caught by the breathing.

Aware of body sensations with an ease, or a grace, or generosity that has lots of space for what's here. When mindfulness is based on space, that spaciousness, the space that's here, will invite, will allow for discursive thoughts to stop. They are not needed in the space of full stopping.

So this talk will never end, and there'll be no bell. And Matthew and I will go, and you do as you see fit.

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