Stillness

Matthew Brensilver

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So there is our body, our emotions, our thoughts, and we practice such that our body becomes a vehicle for awakening. We become more and more intimately attuned to the energetic flows of our body, attuned to the tension and resistance, and attuned to when our body feels of one piece and unified and whole. There is a certain kind of energetic uniformity that often comes as we practice, and it feels like the awareness is poured equally into each cell of our body. So we feel deeply embodied, but it also feels safe to put down our body. Meaning, to stop modeling it in our mind, to become unconcerned with where it is, what it is, where it ends, what it looks like.

We're becoming intimately connected with affect and emotion. We know what brings suffering. And we can make good guesses about what leads toward happiness. Buddhism, in some ways, is a kind of behavioral modification program where we vividly experience our own captivity, such that we long to be free. And that's even less fun than it sounds, you know. Generally speaking, what did I say? Vividly experience our own captivity. That's part of the path.

But we often actually miss that emotional current of *dukkha*. We actually can kind of leapfrog over it. We just take *dukkha* at surface value, but it's important to stay and linger, and to feel acutely the dissatisfaction rather than immediately medicating it with a *dharma* technique or something. We experience our unfreedom, and then that really kind of foments a kind of longing to be free. But it's not an impulsive longing.

So, in a way that I don't love the word, but defilements, you know, the forces of suffering, have their own self-soothing effects. If they were all pain, we would have left them behind a long time ago. But now, as we practice with these kind of emotional currents, the pain of our tangled habits is experienced so clearly that it becomes more natural. We do not have to be

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convinced to let go. We can't do it. We can't just choose, but we experience the friction so viscerally that we come to know in a deeper way: this is *dukkha*.

And as we train in this way, our emotional system becomes a kind of very good guide to happiness. Our emotional circuits kind of, yeah, they know more. We untangle the signal from the noise, refine out the delusion from the wisdom—that wisdom that needs protection and honoring and listening—and our love deepens. Those particular emotional circuits become more prominent, increasingly prominent, rather than defaulting to a kind of smallness of self-referential thinking. We default more and more to a kind of quiet care and an attention that is outwardly directed. Our care spills beyond the bounds of our own heart.

And thinking, thinking, it becomes so light and pleasurable and useful. This lightness and this pleasure and this utility is partially a function of the fact that we're no longer asking thinking to do jobs that it cannot do. We ask thinking to do too much, and it can do some things, but it cannot do as much as we want it to do. We cannot ask thinking to digest all painful experience. We cannot ask thinking to find some way out of the *First Noble Truth*, cannot ask thinking to game out all of *anicca*, uncertainty, find a kind of perfect path through the labyrinth of *saṃsāra*.

And so we can't ask thinking to do jobs it cannot do, but we can come to delight in the tremendous power of thinking to alleviate suffering. To delight in the space, as we heard, that surrounds our thoughts. Delight even in the aesthetic pleasure of words. To delight in, you know, the *Dhamma*, like the oral tradition: “Thus have I heard. Thus have I heard.” And this embodiment, and this training and cultivation of our emotional circuits, and this reliance on thinking for what it can do, this leads us into some measure of stillness.

So that's the theme for this afternoon: stillness, nonmovement. Something in us wants to stop. Don't know how. Something in us wants to stop. Maybe we can say that this realm of experience is churn and movement and becoming. Something in us wants to stop.

There's that famous tale of Aṅgulimāla. This violent bandit, seeking to harm the Buddha, and through his magical powers, the Buddha manages to evade Aṅgulimāla. Aṅgulimāla never catches the Buddha, and Aṅgulimāla yells, “You know, stop, contemplative, stop!” Right? And the Buddha famously replies, “I have stopped. You stop.” So what stops? What does it mean to stop?

If one is trying to stop, is that truly stopping? And is there something in you, this moment, that wants to stop? Not something you feel averse to and try to stop, but something itself that wants to stop. The path, in a certain sense, is about endings, about endings. In a number

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of senses, the Buddha placed *anicca* at the center of all things: impermanence, uncertainty—that all comes to an end. And even though we reflect on that all the time, there's something that remains almost unbelievable about it.

In other words, it's hard to recognize the full scope of the assumption of permanence that structures our life. Almost like our cognition doesn't work at some level without the assumption of permanence. And yet we are also preoccupied with change. Maybe in some sense, one must be. I do have this intuition: one must be very free, freer than I am, you know, to really understand the pervasiveness of *anicca*. The path is about endings.

The path is about extinguishment—the end of holding, cessation. Cessation of self and world, the ceasing of the modeling of self and world in the mind. Cessation of suffering, stopping. We all know those times, maybe in your life, maybe here, a period of intense effort, maybe a long day at work or caring for others, or just taking care of one's life, or a long day here, where there's a sense of almost like a biological imperative of resting. You know, it's like nothing left to give. Something must rest. Something must stop.

But how much might stop in us? And what is true rest? I remember a line from Rumi: "The only true rest comes when you're alone with God." In the Buddhist tradition, maybe we say only true rest is cessation. I remember being a yogi—this was maybe almost twenty years, twenty years ago—in the trailers at Spirit Rock, when there were trailers. And it was a daylong. I was, you know, just sitting, sitting a daylong.

And the daylong was something like—I forget exactly the title—but it was something like "Free Your Love." You know, they really went big. They went big, and they, you know, we practiced. I don't remember much about the day, except the part I'll tell you about. It was like a normal day until at some point they were like, "Okay, we're gonna have a kind of—we're gonna do this exercise, like this tunnel of kindness," you know.

There were about maybe a hundred people there, something like that, and we lined up fifty people on one side and then, just a few feet away to create the tunnel, fifty other people facing those people. And the practice was that each person would peel off the top of the tunnel, and they would wear a kind of bandana over their eyes, and so you couldn't see at all. And you would then be shepherded down the tunnel with each yogi touching your shoulder and whispering something loving in your ear, right? And I remember, like, the teachers, they are very bad at time management. I know these teachers, so it was a long exercise, you know.

And I remember, you know, sometimes people would just say, like, a very innocuous, simple thing: "May you be happy," or whatever. But sometimes they would say, like, deeply intimate

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things in your ear, you know. And I remember the woman sitting in front of me. I could just tell there was, like, she was really practicing, you know. And when she came down the tunnel, I just put my hand on her shoulder and I whispered, like, "I think you're falling in love with the *Dharma*," and she squeals with delight, you know. And then I walk down, you know.

And I don't know any of these people. I knew one of the teachers, you know, but I didn't know anybody. They didn't know me. I was not teaching or whatever. And some people just said simple things, but then some people were like, "I don't know." Somehow they knew something about me, and so I was like, shoulder, you know, hand after hand on my shoulder.

Then it's like, you know, "There is a party inside of you that wants to come out," you know. And this is like an hour and a half of that, you know. And I mean, I remember we were at such a fever pitch of love, you know. And it was like, you know, you couldn't imagine. It was like a very ecstatic kind of thing, you know. And very beautiful.

And I remember feeling like, "This is not sustainable." You know, this is not sustainable. The heart needs to rest. Even love can fatigue the heart. Everything can fatigue the heart except peace. Something in us wants to stop.

And so we're in this kind of precarious balance, you know. Like our homeostatic balance is kind of precarious, and we're, you know, we're constantly adjusting, dialing things up or down. And in some way, even though it gets called fidgeting or clinging or whatever, even as we're trying to adjust all the knobs of *saṃsāra*, at some level I take all of that, the whole umbrella term of fidgeting, as a certain kind of longing for peace. Most everything, like, terminates in that longing. May heart be at ease.

There's a lot that moves, and so what is movement? What's non-stillness? Clinging is not stillness. Clinging is a kind of movement. The Buddha highlights the four nodes of that movement, of that friction: of views and conventions, of clinging to sense pleasure, and clinging to the subtle pleasure of selfing. That pleasure that cuts both ways.

We're always siding with ourselves. My view, my pleasure, conventions I follow. And movement begins to settle when we stop siding with ourselves. There's a kind of agitation that comes when we feel like something has to happen, when our minds are contracted and it feels like there are unresolved forces pushing and pulling inside of us. Clinging is experienced as a kind of friction and unevenness. You know, when I was talking about the unification of the body, clinging is kind of the hot spots and intensities in the system.

And so we're encouraged to relax, you know. And letting go is not synonymous with relaxation, but tension and clinging are very deeply linked. And so there's a way in which the

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Dharma is deeply a kind of practice of self-soothing, you know. And self-soothing sounds so basic, like what, you know, you give an assignment to a child that's losing their temper or something. But how thoroughly, deeply can we soothe ourselves? Right now, there may be whirlpools of energy, thought, feeling, body somehow needing some soothing.

Soothing does not mean to erase them or force relaxation. And then we see what tension feels necessary, which kind of whirlpools of holding and clinging and contraction feel indispensable. Feel like to be without them would be to be unprotected, naked. Time is movement. Sense of being squeezed between past and future. Sense of even the present being under pressure.

Now, *bhava-taṇhā*—the craving to become—that's movement. Craving to become: different ways of talking about this, but goals. Goals, no matter what species, fundamentally structure our life and our mind. Our mind, at some level, is a to-do list, you know. And we have a kind of hierarchy of goals, and every goal includes me in it. Some particular view of how I'm in that, some vision of what is to come, what ought to come.

And the question is, like, what would it feel like if all goal-directed behavior ceased? Our *dharma* goals, you know, it's fair enough. There is suffering and there is freedom, and I don't think of them as the same thing. And there's nothing to go, nowhere to go, or something like that. But spiritual goals have the same pressure on the mind that materialistic goals have. And what would it feel like if all goal-directed behavior, mental action, emotion, ceased?

If the kind of goal hierarchy just collapsed, all notions of movement to or toward, all notions of progress—how lost might we be without some notion of progress? But progress, and even spiritual progress and aspiration, can exert a kind of pressure. This may be why the Zen folks say, you know, *zazen* is good for nothing. Meditation, good for nothing. Our mental and emotional life is structured by our insistence on the future coming, and so many movements of our mind are about finding our way forward. This is experienced as pressure, movement, force.

The Buddha said there's a wish for, you know, craving to sense pleasure, to nonbecoming, and craving for existence or becoming. And on the one hand, this craving to become is about life, about just staying alive. And it goes without saying that, yeah, life is better than non-life, right? But we just want to be accountable for the enormous range of effects that that preference has on the mind. To become, begin to account for the ways in which an insistence on the next moment structures what's here, creates movement.

And it's subtler than just self-preservation. It's like the urge to reproduce the self in the next

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moment, to not be surprised by who we are, to reiterate ourselves, to predict that, yeah, in the next moment it's me, it's me, me. The Buddha said, “We're always becoming something other.” This process of tumbling forward, this movement that afflicts us. And when becoming is the priority, it means the most important thing is really threat and opportunity.

And we're trying to trace out what the past means for my future. What that pain? What that betrayal? What that ache? What does that mean for my future? And we're wondering how the present, what is actually here, what's in our feeling circuits, how that points somewhere. What trajectory am I on? What is this trajectory? Okay, it's kind of pressure in that.

We feel this movement moment by moment, and it manifests in practice too. You know, just even becoming a better practitioner and being a good yogi, even the aspiration to be free. We want to be, you know, that sense of being displaced in time from myself. You know, from some idealized self that I'll arrive at. And it's not that we cannot deepen our freedom. It's just that we're always imagining freedom from the vantage point of becoming and this tumbling forward of self.

Of freedom as a kind of acquisition of this mind of me in this moment. Even these subtle, almost noble desires are *bhava-taṇhā*, I guess I'm trying to say. What would this moment feel like right now if it were futureless? You know, a kind of, yeah, the experiment of like, okay, if I were to live this moment, this moment for all eternity, if it were only ever just this now, what would that do to my heart? How would I want to soften, let go, be, live, die that moment?

This movement can come to rest. Yes, Eliot.

> At the still point, the turning world—neither flesh nor fleshless, neither from nor towards—at the still point there is the dance. There, the dance is, but neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, neither ascent nor decline, except for the point—the still point. There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. I can only say there we have been, but I cannot say where, and I cannot say how long, for that is to place it in time. The inner freedom from the practical desire, the release from action and suffering, release from the inner and the outer compulsion, yet surrounded by a grace of sense.

What did Eliot discover? Like, as a, you know, poet and a reborn Anglican contemplative of some kind. Very wild to see that language in a very different contemplative tradition. There's a little, maybe, like the moment is experienced purely as potential energy, not action or kinetic energy. Like something is to be born, but before that, there's not a thing. And maybe,

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phenomenologically, it's like the still point of the turning world—a little like the pressure before, before the Big Bang or something, when the world was born.

Intention is movement to be stilled. Also, to be subtle, but that's to be stilled also. In other words, willfulness is a kind of movement. And you say, very reasonably, that intention, wise intention, wise effort, all this, thus there's wholesomeness in that. That's central to the path. Yeah, yeah, yes and no.

Some part of our mind wants *Dharma* talks, wants the teachings to kind of, you know, in some ways invite us, tell us what to do, what to intentionally implement, you know. We want something to do, and yeah, we do give instructions. Many instructions. There's, of course, a revered place for wise intention, invitations to use our attention wisely, to perceive in maybe a new way. We're being invited into all these new ways in which we might experience our body and emotion and thought. We're asked to make many efforts and invest much, toward mindfulness, toward harmlessness, toward renunciation.

But we can't be told to do grace. And grace is a big part of the path. That's a word, of course, from a different tradition, but feels apt. We go against the stream. So much of this path is against the stream. It requires a measure of intention and willfulness, and we enter the stream, and that is grace.

And there are many places that our willfulness cannot take us, and there's a lot that we do, but there's a lot that the path must do to us. Ajahn Brahm said, “If you hold a leaf, even if you try to be completely still, the tremble in your muscles will still shake the leaf. And instead, you protect the leaf from the breeze without holding. Comes into some state of stillness.” *Dharma* cannot, in some way, cannot be done. It's very hard for the active doing aspect of our minds and the path to believe the kind of receptive, graciousness side of the path, and so on.

This path, we are seeing what it is like to kind of build this model of what the path is, of reestablishing intention, practice with diligence, with effort, of a kind of self-monitoring and all of that. And we also know we run into the limits of our willfulness on retreat. That's part of how the path is designed, how the retreat architecture is designed, is that it runs you right into the limits of your doingness and all of that movement. And we have to perceive that, in those moments, we cannot do the *dharma*. We have to wait, in a way.

What do the teachers here say? “Wait for help to find you.” Same, Meghan O'Gieblyn, reflecting on her own struggles with doing and willing, used the phrase that stayed with me: “the puppet regime of self-governance.” Stillness requires surrender, and if it feels like I'm doing

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it, doing anything, it's not exactly still. And so, surrender, surrender is a kind of dissolution of volitions. We're actually letting go of the path on our own. That small rag-and-bone shop of the self trying to do the path.

We do not engineer our awakening. That's not our job, and that can't be guided by our intention. We cannot plan, you know, our redemption. And so we do all of this work with our effort and intention, and then, in a way, we're just entrusting ourselves to the stream of this moment. We're letting this stillness heal us. And yeah, we start to sense, okay, something is stabilizing.

And, you know, the sense of some stillness, even as phenomena move. Even as, you know, body and feeling and thought move, there's a growing stillness. Different ways of talking about it, but something is experienced as still, even as phenomena arise and pass. This famous description from Ajahn Chah:

> If you know that all things are impermanent, all your thinking will gradually unwind. When you reflect on the uncertainty of everything that passes, you'll see that all things go in the same way. Whenever anything arises, all you need to say is, “Oh, another one.” Have you ever seen flowing water? Have you ever seen still water? If your mind is peaceful, it will be just like still flowing water. You've only ever seen flowing water and still water, haven't you? But you've never seen still flowing water. Right there, right where your thinking cannot take you. Even though it's peaceful, you can develop wisdom. Your mind will be like flowing water, and yet it is still. Wisdom can arise here.

We attune to what wants to stop, not aversion, not hating movement into stillness. That's just more movement. What wants to stop? At that point, our hands are not on the kind of *dharma* wheel. We practice. Yeah, we can stop everything.

You can intentionally stop, and whatever does not stop, you grant permission for that to move forever, and then that stops too. Sit for a moment. Just entrusting yourself to a goodness that does not belong to you.

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