

The Gift of Fearlessness

Based on a talk given by Rev. angel Kyodo williams on December 15, 2011 at the Center for Transformative Change/New Dharma Meditation Center in Berkeley, California.

So here at the Center we are in the midst of what is called our Practice Period, popularly known as 27 Days of Change. It's borrowed from a Buddhist tradition of monks going into the monastery. Unlike some traditions, in the Buddhist tradition monks went around begging-that was mostly what they did-and then they had a period of time where they had intensive practice for about three months. In the Japanese Zen tradition this intensive practice is called *ango*, and it means peaceful dwelling. My experience is that it was anything but.

Given that we live urban lives, we take that 90-day period and we break it up throughout the year. We have three of these Practice Periods throughout the year, and we have at least one *sesshin*-we now call them our Inner Justice Intensives-and that roughly gets us through the 90 days. Hence, the topic of the talk, "How to Practice."

The person who most comes to mind when I think about the notion of practice is Abraham Heschel, a Jewish theologian who was quite vigorous in supporting civil rights and protesting the Viet Nam war. What he said was, "Life is a war that can't be won by the noble magic of merely remembering a golden rule." He meant that we have to do something about it, if we want to win this war of life we have to participate. We have to get in there. A few golden rules rattling around in the back of our head aren't going to quite get it.

A lot of people are disturbed by any kind of language, especially in our mildly progressive circles, that suggests war. Of course, the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is just riddled with it; it's all about war. There are all these wrathful deities and there's always some stuff going on-the conquering and slaying of things. And there's the saying, "If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him."

We get all prickly about that, and I think that when we do that what we deny is something about the fundamental nature of human beings in relationship to other human beings. Maybe not the nature of human beings by themselves, which may be perfectly peaceful, but once people try to occupy some of the same spaces at the same times-no reference intended-we are prone to conflict.

Heck, we are prone to conflict *in here*. Why wouldn't we be prone to conflict out there? Of course, the references made to conquering are about conquering the hinderances to our own Awakening, that there is no real enemy other than the enemy of the self who misunderstands what is important in life.

So after some years of practice and some years of teaching, I came down to the wild conclusion that mostly we don't succeed at change because we get in our own way. I usually say we don't want to change, but if we just assume for a moment that we at least do want to change, the primary reason that we don't is because we get in our own way. I hope to cobble together a few ideas about how we might alter that.

The first thing is Right Motivation. We actually have to have an appropriate motivation for practicing at all. Because, let's face it, it's easier to nap, right? I mean literally on the cushion, in the pew, in the temple on your knees, wherever. It's easier to nap and figuratively it's easier to go to sleep on yourself. We have a wonderfully accommodating culture that supports napping at every possible moment, it's fascinatingly accommodating for this purpose.

So in the very beginning, the right motivation is *anything that'll get you there*. In the very beginning, that's the right motivation. You want to be better than someone; you need to prove something to your mother; you're trying to reject your own lineage. You're a Jew running away from your Jewishness. You're a Christian running away from Christianness. You're an Atheist running away from your Atheistness. Whatever it is when you first begin, anything is the right motivation. But after awhile it won't suffice.

It doesn't take long for us to come to the conclusion that we as

human beings are frail and faulty creatures and disappointing to boot, that we ourselves, in our own intention to make things happen, fall down on ourselves regularly. So if we just do this for ourselves... Yeah, not so much. That's why the diet industry is booming. That's why the exercise machines in the infomercial industry are booming, too. We buy all those machines and get on them for five minutes and stick them in our closets until the next one comes out. I have at least five myself.

So eventually the right motivation must be something greater than yourself. For different traditions or different paths what that may be could be different. It could be union with the Divine, to know God, to know yourself, to discover your Buddha nature. Or, as most traditions espouse in some kind of way, it could be for the sake of all other beings. Because what else would we be here for? All of us in our differing ways and strangeness plopped here together mixing all over the place, boundaries completely gone now? What other useful way is there to spend our time other than to be of service to the "upliftment" of everyone? To seek the safety and security and self-determination of everyone else? That make sense?

One of the Buddhist texts says that first you give food and safety and then you give teaching, that's the second highest thing. But the most high is to give the gift of fearlessness. Fearlessness basically comes down to encouraging people to be willing to show up for themselves, regardless of the conditions.

Fearlessness, meaning, not that you're not afraid of anything, but that you have the willingness to show up for yourself regardless of the conditions. That's the most high, and that is the most esteemed motivation. You function in your life in a way that is organized around being a model for others and by saying, "If I can do this, so can you. So come on."

It's not about being better than. That's in the beginning. It's about ultimately saying, "If I can do this, so can you," even if you never speak the words. The mere fact that you show up for yourself, the mere fact that you are present in your own life and to the lives of others has a magnetism that is hard to resist.

Second, we have to be willing to get beyond the content of the things that we do. This is often a deterrent to practice, that we focus on the content: Well, I meant this, but what happened was I did that and then this happened. Well, I couldn't get up because, last night the blah, blah, blah...

We come up with all kinds of reasons not to change. We'll tell ourselves, "Well, I *had* to eat this," when we're just changing ordinary things like our diet-when we're trying to have a more healthful fare in our life. "Well, I ate this because I was thinking that tomorrow I would do something better. I was just not feeling well today, so I needed to eat a little bit extra. I'm in a bad mood."

The excuses that we come up with are endless. Does anybody have ready excuses? Even for the things you are committed to? Do you have any excuses for those? I have a template of them. I just keep them in my pocket. Which one shall I whip out when I'm avoiding whatever it is that I'd like to do?

But we need to get beyond the content, because when you think about the specific details, they don't matter so much. Honestly, how much of what you've done do you remember? Really? I'm having a hard time with before I took a nap today. I don't remember. When you asked somebody to tell you about someone else, they don't tell you what they've *done*, they tell you how they *be*, "They're like this. They're very kind. They're very scratchy. They're difficult. They're very detailed. Very exuberant, actually a little dull. A little bit listless." Whatever it is.

We get time bound things like their job, they work for this place. But no one gives you a list of, they meant, to do this. They intended to make this kind of change. What they tell you about is not what they did, but the pattern that shows up in terms of who they are-the pattern because the content disappears. What's left is the pattern of our behavior that leaves the imprint upon people as to who we are. That make sense?

Once in a while there are people that do some extraordinary act and so we remember that act. That's very rare, actually. And it's not generally the first thing that comes to mind, unless it's

someone that notorious for some particular act. We remember the quality of someone showing up in life and that quality is expressed by their pattern of behavior. It's the imprint that they leave behind; it's the imprint that you are leaving behind.

I love good intentions, and they're not good enough to practice, to change. Your good intentions will get you halfway there, maybe, maybe. It's feet on the ground that's going to make the difference and the willingness to get beyond-I call this the "don't believe your own bullshit" rule-the stories that you tell yourself about why you couldn't effect change in your life. The stories you tell yourself about why you couldn't effect change in your relationships to other people because they're doing this and they're doing that. And they *never*, and they *always*.

What's important is the patterns that show up. Somehow, no matter where I go, airplanes are always determined to keep my stuff. They're just determined. It doesn't matter what airline it is, they're just determined to keep my stuff. And it's the stewardess's fault and it's the person next to me's fault-I had something and it got down between the seats and they put their jacket on top of it and that's why I left it.

I'm telling you a story about me leaving my things all over the place. I used to leave things everywhere like a pigeon, droppings every place. And I would tell stories about what happened, this is what happened when I got out of the cab and this is what happened when I was in the supermarket. I had all of these reasons why I left things wherever I went. This is from quite young. But somehow I always managed to lose my stuff.

I often tell the folks here that what we want to lose is our baggage. In the meantime, I need to keep ahold of my things and the only way that I can do that is to stop telling myself the story of why it happened and get to the truth of "somehow that's always happening to me"-that wherever I go there I am, without my stuff. And wherever you go there you are.

You know that you have things that occur in your life, that somehow occur *to*, *with*, and *by* you, but they don't quite happen

that way to other people. We have to wake up to that and be willing to put aside the content of what we meant, the content of what we hoped for, the content of how it ought to have been different this time so that we can be honest and truthful with ourselves about the fact that we have, thus far, constructed a certain pattern to show up in particular ways. If we want to work out why, that's what therapists are for. But we do have to get clear about the fact that it's not working for us, and we have to get clear that we need to do something about it.

We can't do anything about it if we aren't willing to be honest with ourselves that it's happening. If we shift the blame, if we shift the reasoning, if we constantly put it off someplace else, we end up with the same thing over and over again. That might be okay because it's up to you. Some of the ways that we are work for us in some way.

In fact, anything that you do is working for some part of you. Anything that you repeat is working for some part of you. Maybe whatever it is isn't enough to tackle. But if there's something that you want to change and you have the right motivation, you'd have to be willing to get out of the content and take a broad view of your life and look at the way that you are showing up in the world. Listen to what people tell you. Also remember, however, that you have trained everyone around you to shut up about the things you don't want to hear. We have good practice with that. In fact, if you're not hearing any critique, it's time to shuffle your people around.

We're really good at training people to not talk about those things. *Don't say anything about that.* Even our best friends, closest comrades learn very quickly. Not just from you, they learned it themselves in their own upbringing, what not to say. So you have to be wrong, because you've already created a house of delusion for yourself. The only person that can really take it down is you.

And finally I have to say, with emphasis, that **this one** practice, this one doesn't matter without the first two. In fact, it's terribly irresponsible, in some ways, without the the first two in place: Let go of the outcomes. Got to let go of the outcomes. Ultimately,

the fixation on outcomes keeps us in a cycle of not being able to have joy as we make our way through our lives, as we move through change. And then if what we create for ourselves is just another place of being downtrodden and pained and everything is awful and it's all terrible, it's not worth it. Then the whole motivation thing really goes by the wayside pretty quickly. When we fixate and focus too much on the outcomes, we have a way of losing track of the journey.

We create separation between what we call "the path and the goal." But truthfully, the beginning of the end is always right now. So instead of casting our eyes far out into the vision of ourselves, whatever it is that we will eventually become and then kind of waiting for it to descend or land or effervesce upon us, we can just take a step and shorten the distance between here and there by taking the action, by taking the step, **right now**. And then taking the next step and then the next step.

That's not to say don't have goals, because that's the whole deal. The whole deal is that we have a goal, but we release the outcomes. I'm fond of saying the outcomes are none of our business, that our job is just *this* moment, that our attention is right here and right now, gathering everything we have available in this moment, not yesterday's moment. Our job is not on what was possible when we were thinking about this goal, but on just this moment, giving everything we have available with joy and hopefully a little chagrin, which I like to call "sweet chagrin," for the effort of self. That's what is ours to attend to at this very moment.

The best thing about that is this:

Having given your effort and attention to each moment as it unfolds, regardless of the outcome, you experience the joy of being.

You experience the joy of having been true to yourself.

You experience the joy of having been in alignment with your truth, having made your best effort. And if it didn't work out

the way you intended, so be it.

I've never met anyone who gave their best effort without focusing on the outcome, who wasn't completely at peace with whatever happened on the other end. Completely at peace. Not that they didn't say, "It would have been nice if it had gone the other way." But in *here* they're good, because in here they don't have to say, "Well, I could have given that little bit extra."

You ever hold back in a relationship? It falls apart and you think, "There was just that little bit that I was holding back." Or you decide you want to accomplish something, and your fear of actually getting what you want had you hold back just that little bit, and you watch it disappear from your grasp.

Some Teachers might think that's okay. But I think it sucks. I don't think it sucks that you missed out on what you wanted; I think it sucks that you have the regret that you knew you could've given more, because you knew you held back. That's the only thing that ever sucks, when you have to live with the awareness that you didn't show up for yourself. But if you did, and if you do-and after today I expect that all of you will-you have nothing to fear, and you will truly be a giver of fearlessness.