

Your Practice Is Your Life

(Based on a talk given by Rev. angel Kyodo williams in December 2007 at the Center for Transformative Change/New Dharma Meditation Center in Berkeley, California.)

Good morning.

I've been doing a little talking lately about commitments and vows, intentions--all of those concepts that are about choices that we make in our lives and, once we've made those choices, taking steps to actualize them. Each of them has the quality of needing to be maintained. So it's not like you just press the button and the vow is done and you're done, you're finished. They actually require not only the start up effort, but also the maintenance. And in order to maintain our vows, our intentions, our commitments we actually have to take the time to periodically reflect on them, to periodically reflect and revisit the vows, intentions, and commitments that we've made.

We do that because as we get into our day-to-day lives it's pretty easy to let a vow or an intention that we made at some other point kind of slip off of the to-do list. That happens because everything is moving fairly quickly and there always seems to be a lot to do. And we're not all living in a community; we're not living in the kind of container, that lets us say, Well, all there is to do is to maintain in these vows. All there is to do is to maintain these intentions. Really the monks and the nuns have it easy, because the step-up for them is that that's all there is to do, and everything you do falls into that.

But is that possible for people living in the world? Is it possible or do we always have to choose, on an ongoing basis, between keeping our intentions, maintaining those intentions, or living our lives, quote unquote? Are we always going to be in the dance, in the tension between the commitment that I've made and my life? My real life? Maybe we've got to move back and forth. Is that the general sense that we have when we negotiate our relationship to these vows and intentions, or is there a possibility that is different? Is there a possibility of allowing, in fact, setting up the situation in our lives so that those vows, our intentions, our commitments become the guide path by which we live our lives? Thus, everything falls into the framework of those vows and intentions.

Most often, it seems to me, we get stuck in the first idea that what we're doing is making choices between opposing forces. That on the one hand, we want to live these lives of service, and we want to have practice in order to bring a clear view of how to do that, and how to do that in a good way, into clarity for ourselves. But on the other hand, we want to have relationships, and we want to go out and party, and we want to have fun in the whole big general sense of the word, which could be the beach--for me it's a hammock, or any where at

all, really--and there's the store to go to, the groceries to buy. There are the chores to do, the bathrooms to clean. There's the regular everyday life stuff, also. And then there are these rather disconcerting elements called people that we also have to negotiate into this whole scheme. I mean, this room is getting pretty crowded, here. We've got vows and intentions and commitments; we have play, we have love, we have work, we have chores, a category all of their own, and then we have people, people. Not even just the people that we chose, random people. Random people we just run into every day. How do we make sense of this?

How do we find our way to removing the perception of friction, as in a kind of negative friction, as in an oppositional tension from this balance, from this walk we're trying to walk. How do we lay the path with the bricks of our intention and of our vows and have our lives roll out on that path? What does it require of us? Because what's out there is just material, really. What is required of us in order to have the skill to do this, to essentially to be a bricklayer for the path of your own life--to be able to choose the bricks that you want to choose and have that be the solid ground that you walk on?

Speaker One: Is that a question for me?

aKw: That's always a question for you. Even when there's no question mark on it.

To begin with, it might have something to do with assuring that the stones that you choose, the bricks that you choose are solid ones, not the new thin version that they have that crumble, that are just for appearances' sake, you know? They used to make houses with bricks, and now they have this brick face that is, maybe, about a tenth as thin as real brick. It's just there to give the appearance of that solidity that we see and we recognize and we feel when we see a brick house.

We want to make sure that the path that we are creating for ourselves is not just in appearances. That it's not laid in such a way that our vows are not formed and related to as just a veneer. That they are just a thin layer hiding a much less solid underbelly. Because our vows are our foundation; that's what everything else is going to rest upon. And if we hold them, if we relate to them in such a way that they're just a veneer, just brick face, eventually, probably sooner than later, the storm that comes will just rip that brick face off and expose the shabby underside for what it is.

So it's really important that we choose a strong foundation, vows that we call really settle into. That are not--if you know anything about bricks, you don't have to know, you've seen it--that are not crumbly, not too dry. Because if they're too dry, they'll just crumble when anyone taps on them. If they've got too much moisture, then there's no way for them to hold and be solid and when

it rains they'll just wash away. So you need just the right kind of consistency. You need something that feels right to you in terms of actual vows--vows that feel like you can connect to them. That when you read them, when you say the words you feel the ground forming beneath you. And if you don't have that, there's no way to maintain them. If you have kind of empty hollow brick, there's no way to maintain it. If you're just mouthing the words of vows, in this kind of way: [said without enthusiasm] Beings are numberless; I vow to awaken them. If you're not fully planting your feet on the solid ground of that foundation and allowing yourself to root on your path, there's nothing to be unfolded in front of you, nothing for you to rest your life on. And vows are alive, they're dynamic. They're to be played with in the sense that if they become too rigid then that also gives a brittleness to the situation.

So once the vows are chosen and laid for you, you lay them out, if there's no give, if there's no space between them, if they're all pressed up against each other then there's no room that allows for breathing and growth. When all types of paths are laid, they realize that actually you can't lay it as tight as you might want to. You actually have to build in some space for breathing room, because everything that's alive breathes. Everything that's alive breathes and needs space in order to breathe and, in fact, needs space to expand and to contract, because this is the ebb and flow of our lives. And if we don't build that in, in terms of how we view our vows, if we don't build in some space in the way that we view our vows that allows for contraction and expansion, then the path gets too tight and just crumbles beneath our feet, and we end up thinking, Oh, those weren't very good vows, anyway.

So there's some work to do. It's not just about mumbling some words even if you mumble them every day, even if you mumble them loud. There's some work to do in terms of how you view them. You have to have, to begin with, a good motivation for having these vows to begin with. Your motivation should be clear, as clear as it can be and then you have to have the right attitude in terms of how you relate.

So there's the motivation, and generally when we first arrive at practice we actually don't have really good motivation. We have thin motivation, often motivation that's coming from our own wanting to save ourselves, or wanting to look kind of cool, or wanting to add another thing to our list of accomplishments.

And our motivation needs to be strengthened in a particular way, which usually has something to do with us getting beyond the place in which we're fascinated with our own practice. Fascinated like it's a toy. Fascinated like it's something to be shown off. Fascinated like it's something to be taken out and played with when we feel like it and quickly set aside when the mood doesn't strike us. Only when we pass through that kind of relationship with practice and it just become ordinary, are we really capable of recognizing and having the

appropriate motivation for really stepping on a path.

We're essentially good, really, we are fundamentally good. We have obscurations; we have things that get in our way, that disable our ability to see what the source is, what the motivation is for the choices that we make. The very first realm of our practice is actually to clarify our motivation.

The way that we establish a path here in New Dharma is to kind of scoot you out there and leave you to flail around a bit. And find out if after your first push in the water, whether you want to come back on the boat and be safe and secure. Because if you do you're not going to be able to weather that path, not if you expect that when you step out on a path that someone's always going to be there to have their hand out fixing things for you, making it comfortable, making sure that you know everything that's going to happen, making sure that you're secure in that old way that we like to be secure so that we know everything and we know what's coming. So that it's all laid out, What's the next step? When does this happen? How long does that take? We feel sure of ourselves then.

And I'm just guessing, just imagining that if it were that simple there'd be a whole bunch of folks that have tread the path and crossed over to the other shore. So we have to be prepared through our motivation for the not knowing that is inherent to walking on any path of discovery. Because that's what it is, a path of not knowing. It's not a path of knowing; it's a path of discovery. And if you have all the answers, if the route is all laid out for you--you just have to call 511 to make sure the traffic is clear up ahead. You know your pocket is full of money and you're going to be able to eat at all the stops along the way. In fact, you'll eat just what you want to eat, when you want to--if you have that view of your path, there's no discovery. Not to say there's nothing to be discovered, there's plenty to be discovered. But you won't be able to discover what's there.

This isn't specific to each of you; it's common to most everyone. Life basically knocks the wind out of us. We reach out for some kind of help. We get some signal and some potential for help and then we proceed with the same behavior that got the wind knocked out of us to begin with. And we think that this is workable. Most of us suffer from trying to get our practice to fit into our lives. We suffer from trying to get our practice to fit into our lives and suffer from all of the shuffling and fighting and cajoling that comes with it.

Is everybody getting the picture here? Your practice will never fit into your life. It can only be your life. Otherwise it's just a hobby, it's just another task, it's just another to do, it's another appointment. Whatever it is that your practice is, we happen to sit and do asana practice here, we happen to breathe, whatever it is, if prayer is your practice and you squeeze it in on Sundays, then it's just another appointment. And don't get me wrong, people go and keep

their appointments for their entire lives. Just like people keep going and keep appointments with therapists for their entire lives. But the fruit has got no juice when we have that kind of relationship.

There's a saying, that whatever way in which you view your practice is actually what you are going to get out of it. They specifically talk about whatever way you view your Teacher is what you are going to get out of them. So if you are fixated on, My Teacher is really very human, then you are going to get a human experience of your practice. I kind of like that, that's not a bad idea, right? But if you have the view, the view, I'll say that word one more time the view of your teacher as Buddha, as an embodiment of Buddha, then you're going to get a Buddha out of your practice.

It's the same way with your practice itself. If your practice is just something that you fit into your life, well, you're just going to get another appointment, another task fulfilled. And you'll get all the experience of, Got my task fulfilled, did it. But if you hold your practice in a way in which you understand that your practice is your life, as you meet your practice you meet your whole life. And you meet everything in it. And the struggle, the opposition between your life and your practice falls away.

Obviously, that's just not for everyone. It just isn't. And you know when I say this I don't mean to suggest you've got to be special. But you do have to be different. You have to be making different choices. In fact, you could be really stupid and you could make practice your life. In fact, it is easier for those of us that are stupid because we don't complicate the situation with all kinds of ideas.

Those of us that are enamored with ourselves and our thinking complicate things. And then we applaud ourselves for complicating things. We spend all of our time figuring out basically how we can resist our practice. And then we spend time wondering why we resist our practice. And then we spend more time having conversations with other people about what they think about us resisting our practice. Instead of just choosing to be in our lives and allowing everything that arises in our life to be folded into practice, to be understood as practice. And this is what is considered as having the right attitude.

So at the beginning of approaching a path, the first order of business is to just have it clarified, to have your motivation clarified by engaging a path at all. But it doesn't mean we're just on a path. We trick ourselves. People run around. We meet somebody one time and we say to ourselves, I have a Teacher. I'm on a path. Well how do you know? Because you don't even have the view to understand where you are. The first job of the path is actually to help you clarify if you have good motivation to really be there and then once you're there it is up to you to cultivate the attitude to maintain it. And that goes for your commitments and your intentions as well.

If there's something getting in your way-does anybody not have anything getting in their way? If there's something getting in your way, it's your job to discover it. To be willing to do the very, very challenging work of looking at what it is that's getting in your way. I don't mean to have sessions about it. I don't mean to go and make a case out of it. I mean to look, I mean to look into it. What is it in you that keeps you from your commitments? What is it that is unhealed within yourself that keeps you from living the life that you choose? What is it that you have to bring your full attention to before you can really have the right attitude for keeping your vows, maintaining them, for meeting your intentions, for honoring your commitments?

I would say that discovering this and then meeting it, not fixing it, meeting it, being in relationship with it, is probably about 75% of the job, maybe 80% of the job of being on the path. After that it's just a cakewalk, really. And most of us spend a great deal of our time trying to avoid whatever that is and hope that we'll bear fruit, somehow, despite that.

Not gonna happen.

Whatever it is that is unhealed in you, whatever it is that keeps your heart closed, whatever it is that keeps your sight blurred is hindering you from your own Freedom. And Freedom will not be had despite that thing. It will only be had because of your willingness to meet it and it is a gift when we can see what it is. As hard as it might be to look at it, it is a gift, it's truly a gift when we can see what it is. And it's truly an act of courage when we step up every single day, every single moment to meet it. Hear what I'm saying, that we step up to meet it, not that we wait for it to sneak up behind us and whack us in the back of the head, not that we wait for it to slide into the conversation and slip out of our mouths, not that we wait for it to trip us up just as we've got to really take off and run really fast. That we make the choice to go and meet it, is an act of fearlessness that is itself Freedom.

It's getting a little hot in here. 'Cause we all know, right? Can you hear the part of yourself that's making excuses? The very familiar, Well... The part of you that wants to argue, that wants to say, Well, that's not you know...I don't really have to, or What about...? That voice is never, ever, the voice of Freedom, ever. It is only our ego that is interested in picking things apart, in saying, You know, can't we get it a little a bit to the left? It shouldn't quite be that way.

And if, on the other hand, you hear the voice that probably doesn't even have words, that's just a soft, Uhhh. That's the voice you should be listening for, and you should pull your ear close to it because it has something to say. Really there's so much out there to amuse us and distract us away from that unhealed place to instead have us busy ourselves doing all the things that we busy

ourselves with, sometimes including meditation and yoga.

If we don't get to it, we're just holding it off longer and longer, holding off our own liberation. If we don't drop our ideas about fixing it, we're holding off our liberation. We just have to meet it; we just have to meet that knot in the pit of our bellies and bear witness to it until it softens under the sweetness of our gaze. Until it unknots itself because of our willingness to bring attention to it. Once it begins to do that maybe we can help it along, but first we just have to be there like any relationship that we need to bring resolution to. You just have to be there.