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Week 2, Caring for the World: The Eight Awarenesses
Serenity and Meticulous Effort
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Koshin: Welcome back.

Chodo: Welcome back.

Koshin: Yeah. We hope that you had a wonderful week. It was great to be in dialogue with all of you about your own struggles and challenges and celebrations of being free from desire and just experiencing moments of contentment.

Chodo: What I found encouraging was the actually most of you, if not all, are *not* free from desire. So, it made for the interesting week of dialogue and back and forth, as Koshin said, it was fabulous. Thank you so much for all of you who participated. This week we're going to be talking about serenity and meticulous effort.

Koshin: And really looking at how these two come together in terms of how we care for ourselves and for the world.

Chodo: Uh-huh.

Koshin: Want to talk about serenity?

Chodo: There's a wonderful koan, one of my favorite koans, possibly because Master Gudo seems to be a kind of straight, to the point, no messing around kind of guy, which is sort of like what I am, right? Some people will call it grouchy but I like to think of it as being very clear and precise. The Emperor asked Master Gudo, "What happens to a man of enlightenment after death?" "How should I know?" replied Gudo. "Because you are a master," answered the Emperor. "Yes, sir," said Gudo. "But not a dead one." So, I thought that was—I think that's so beautiful. "Yeah, I'm a master. But I'm alive right now, so how do I know what happens after death?"

Koshin: Or after the next moment?

Chodo: Or after the next moment? I'm not a dead master and I don't know what is going to happen to me. Forget when I die. How about just in the next moment? So, can I be in serenity in each moment? Of course it's pretty impossible.

Koshin: And yet...

Chodo: And yet, it's what we strive for: to maintain that equanimity. I think we talked about last week—that equanimous kind of being—to just search for serenity.

Koshin: You know, it's so important. I think this idea of serenity is what brings many of us to meditation practice; to have the desire, as we were talking about last week, which we need some of, to feel more satisfied with where we are so that we can feel more serene. But it's not really the whole story; it's not just about "blissing out." Serenity to me is also that quality of being serene in the midst of our own awkwardness and discomfort. So I think it's really important to include both so we're not talking about kind of being in a *It's a Small World* ride, you know, for a long time like in Disneyworld. Actually, this is interesting: someone got stuck in that ride recently and sued Disneyworld for being stuck in it because he got very agitated from being in that ride where everyone's just very happy all the time.

Chodo: <laughs>

Koshin: I thought that was a fascinating lawsuit. But I think it's not what the promise of meditation practice is and it's not the promise of caring. I think to really care is to really just be more real, so that we are serene in the midst of whatever is real, whatever is awkward or uncomfortable or whatever it is. And at the same time, the next of *The Eight Awarenesses*, meticulous effort, I think ties to this—it's not going to just come. It takes meticulous [effort]—I love that word. It's like, you know, we have to really focus and practice and make it our own and put effort into it and vigor. That's one of the things I love about Zen practice, is you have that vigor and aliveness so that whether we're practicing on the cushion or we're practicing in a relationship, it's about really paying attention to what's alive. And, you know, sometimes we can get very soft and not put in a lot of effort and still expect things just to come to us.

Chodo: Uh-huh.

Koshin: Most people stop meditating because they feel like they don't get better. But it's not even designed for you to feel better. It's just designed to make you feel more alive and present to what's there. There's a story that I love about a young orphan in the

Avatamsaka Sutra. His name is Sudhana, and he goes on a journey to try to understand how to be more alive in the world. It's this incredible story where he is meeting all these different teachers and he has to find all these different ways and he has this epic journey. It's kind of like a dharma adventure, right.

Chodo: It's kind of like the warrior's journey, right?

Koshin: Yeah.

Chodo: The rites of passage.

Koshin: So he has to go and meet all of these teachers, and he meets a drunk and he meets a prostitute and a little girl and a man whose practice is throwing themselves into, you know, the—what is it called, the Mountain of Knives—and all of these different things, all of these extremes. And then, you know, just some regular folk: men, women, children, and elders. All of them have something to teach. I think that meticulous effort for me is about how we can really learn how to care; that there's not a single person who can't teach us something. So this means that in the midst of our ordinary life—I always think of this story as like walking out onto the street. And how you care for yourself, how you hold yourself, how you engage the people in your building or in your neighborhood, right?

Chodo: <laughs>

Koshin: What?

Chodo: <laughing> I just thought of our experience in Bellevue Hospital a few weeks ago. I had kind of a nasty fall in the Zendo; I fell off a stepladder, or rather the stepladder fell out from under me—it was on a training day.

Koshin: What were you training about?

Chodo: The weekend was on death and dying for our foundation students in the Buddhist Contemplative Care program and we had just finished the morning talking about how like that <snaps fingers> life can be snuffed out; we just don't know which moment [it will be]. And I chose that moment, or the stepladder chose that moment, to deliver an incredible teaching. So I landed on the floor after hitting the butcher-block table. I

ripped my face, my eye open, had what, 30 stitches? So, the EMS came and took us to Bellevue Hospital, which is supposedly one of the better trauma centers in the city, but it was a hell realm in there.

Koshin: Uh-huh.

Chodo: The people there were, you know, we're talking about the drunks, the prostitutes, the kids, the men, the women, and I'm laying on that gurney surrounded by not quite so much serenity, as insanity. You know, next to us there was a young woman, an unfortunate young woman who was handcuffed to the chair. On the bed a couple feet away there was a guy who was throwing up. Then someone came in with gunshot wounds. And in the middle of all this, in the midst of all this cacophony, this craziness, appeared this incredible—what looked to me like a 12-year old surgeon—a plastic surgeon. We were just so lucky that day that the plastic surgeon happened to be on rotation. And he took the most incredible care of my face. Talk about meticulous effort. With each stitch...just slowly and beautifully putting in stitches, taking them out. Sutures, right?

Koshin: Uh-huh.

Chodo: And he did this incredible job actually and it was just, I don't know, it was a moment, another moment of *wow*. You know, all this is going on. My life could have ended quite easily. I mean, they rushed me in to get a—

Koshin: CAT scan.

Chodo: CAT scan to see if there was any bleeding in the brain; luckily there wasn't. But it just brings home that need for those moments of serenity in each moment and how meticulous effort, serenity, and craziness can all be happening...

Koshin: At the same time.

Chodo: ...appearing at the same time.

Koshin: He was an amazing teacher, right?

Chodo: It was incredible.

Koshin: And the way he actually walked into the room and the way that he touched your face and the way that when he was actually finished with you that he just turned around and with a sense of grace actually was able to tend to the next person who had a terrible accident and just say “Hello. We’re gonna take care of you,” in the midst of the cacophony. It reminds me of the Edgar Allen Poe story of the two brothers who are in the Maelstrom. The ship is going down—everything is going down—and there is this horror, you know, and they’re battling to hold the mast and there’s the tension of who is going to hold it and who is going to take care of it. They feel like that’s the one secure thing. And so they’re going down to the bottom of the ocean and one brother has knocked the other brother off the mast because he feels like that’s the only thing that they have. And the other brother holds onto a barrel. And when he’s holding onto the barrel, he looks out into the storm in the sea and he sees all the things that are light are actually going up out of the storm and all the heavy things are going down. And he calls out to the brother to say, “let’s tie ourselves to these barrels and throw ourselves in.” But the other brother is clutching and is too afraid to look out. And I feel like that’s how we can care for the world. To be able to look out in the midst of when it feels the most terrible.

Chodo: Uh-huh.

Koshin: And so the one brother ties himself to the barrel and throws himself in and is saved. And I think that that, in some ways, is how we can care for ourselves in the world in the midst of when it’s the most hectic.

Chodo: Yeah, I haven’t heard that story before, but I think you’re pointing to something very important. When we are able to just enter into the situation...we teach our chaplains and our students, our foundation students, that you’re going to walk into some situations on certain days that are going to be really frightening or just absolutely crazy. Maybe you’re in the emergency room, maybe you’re in the MICU or in the SICU and someone is dying or someone’s coming in from a horrific accident. And how do you reach for that barrel? How do you get to find that barrel that’s going to float to the top and not sink with all those who are just in that moment terrified and lost? Something, someone has to bring to the surface a sense of calmness.

Koshin: Right.

Chodo: It’s not always possible.

Koshin: Right.

Chodo: But we can strive for that.

Koshin: With effort.

Chodo: With effort, with meticulous effort; and that's what we're trying to bring in our work...

Koshin: Right.

Chodo: ...in the hospitals and hospice—to model that kind of behavior.

Koshin: And, you know, this is why meditation practice is so important because without it, you can't really understand how to come back to the breath because in each moment, as we said, that cacophony can happen in our mind. So, if we can train ourselves, you know, to keep coming back to the breath, this moment, in this moment, and to train ourselves on the cushion, then we can see how it's so alive in the world.

Chodo: And this moment may not be a very pleasant moment.

Koshin: No.

Chodo: It may be awful. And even though we're trying to maybe find someplace of ease and comfort, or bring some ease and comfort to the situation, sometimes coming back to that moment is “Jesus, I don't know what to do here.”

Koshin: Uh-huh.

Chodo: Or “I can't. I can't look at this. I have to walk out of this room.”

Koshin: Right.

Chodo: It's a moment of awareness. Awareness doesn't have to be and it's not always clarity, and it may not be the moment we would choose.

Koshin: Right.

Chodo: It may just be such an awful moment.

Koshin: But at the same time if you can come back to your breath, in that moment you can actually see the bigger picture.

Chodo: Uh-huh.

Koshin: And there's some ease and serenity that's possible, right?

Chodo: Well, the bigger picture may be that I have to leave.

Koshin: Yeah.

Chodo: I have to walk out of the situation.

Koshin: Or that you have to leave or you could stay or you need to go into, you know, feel your feet on the ground or whatever it is, right?

Chodo: What's that story, you can leave or you can stay?

Koshin: One of our students tells this very amazing story. You know, she heard a teaching that said, "You stay until you need to go. And you only go because you have somewhere else to be." You know, she's a nurse and a chaplain and I love when she talks about that. Because she just really realized in herself that when she needed to go it was just because she had somewhere else to go, not because she had to flee.

Chodo: Right.

Koshin: So this learning how to really fully inhabit where we are is what we'll practice this week, right?

Chodo: I hope so.

Koshin: Yeah.

Chodo: And how will we practice that, Koshin?

Koshin: Well, we'll practice it imperfectly together as a real alive experiment and practice with this sense for moments of serenity and effort. We want to engage. We'll be doing it and we will continue these practices of *The Eight Awarenesses*, but really focus this week on serenity and meticulous effort, trying to be not too tight and not too loose.

Chodo: And maybe not too serene.

Koshin: Not too serene. Not too much, you know?

Chodo: There's that shadow side, right? There's that awful kind of—that serenity that's coming—that's not quite authentic sometimes. We see where, you know, the whole world can be falling apart and the person in front of you says, "It's all as it's supposed to be. It's all just as it is." And it's like, "You know, actually it's not quite like that. It can be really terrifying." And yes, in the 12 steps I mentioned last week—John was my sponsor in a 12-step program—the first step is God. If that's who we are with, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. The wisdom to know when actually this is what it is, I can't change it, and can I be in acceptance, in serenity in this situation.

Koshin: Right. But really inviting, you know, as Bernie Glassman talks about, inviting all the ingredients of your life in.

Chodo: Uh-huh.

Koshin: So when we practice this week we don't want to exclude anything. We're not trying to be something. You're not trying to be serene or trying to be effort. We're just using and inviting everything in together so that we can practice—asking, what is serenity? What is effort for me? And so we'll explore with you this week and look forward to it.

Chodo: Right.