

Koshin Paley Ellison and Robert Chodo Campbell
Week 4, Caring for the World: The Eight Awarenesses
Wisdom and Idle Talk
June 24, 2013
www.tricycle.com/retreats

Chodo: So welcome back. This is the fourth week and our final week of this series, and we'd like to once again thank you for an incredible week of discussion, lively dialogue, some disagreements—I'm sure always healthy and welcome—and some really lively talk. Thank you.

Koshin: Great. So last week we were exploring together the discussion and the last talk on mindfulness and concentration, and this week is our last week of practice. So we really want to focus on the last two of the Eight Awarenesses: wisdom and avoiding idle talk. Wisdom is the heart of our work. The word in Sanskrit is *prajna*, which really means, "before knowing." So it's this quality before we have ideas about something. It's like what we've been talking about for this whole retreat—it's coming to the breath, coming back to the freshness of just what's there.

There's that wonderful story of the Japanese tea master who was visited by the American scholar—I think his name was Nonin—and during the visit the scholar was starting to ask him all these questions about Zen and *What's Zen* and *I want to learn about it*, and in this very beautiful Japanese tea house, the tea master started pouring his cup of tea and he kept pouring the tea and kept pouring the tea, and then it started overflowing out of the cup onto the tatami and all over everything, and the academic guy was like, "Oh my God. What are you doing? Have you gone crazy?" And he said, "No. I'm showing you your mind. And that you're not giving any space for wisdom and for freshness and not-knowing." So this quality of *prajna*, of wisdom, is this way that we don't fill everything up with our ideas.

Chodo: And opinions. He was saying our mind is full of opinions and he was showing him—right? —just how overflowing it was.

Koshin: —what that does and how that impacts our relationships with ourselves and with others.

Chodo: I think what we try to teach our students, particularly our chaplain students, is to be able to enter into a room or situation with no fixed ideas, with no opinions about what is going on, without any agenda—even to the point of not taking on the whole story of a

nurse or the social worker that says, “Go in and see Ms. So-and-so, Mr. So-and-so. They’re very difficult.” We talked a little bit about this last week. “They have this. They have that and they come from this socioeconomic background and they have this or they don’t speak the language.” If we’re not careful, we fill our own cup with all these ideas, with all these opinions, and we’re not walking into the situation free and fresh.

Koshin: Right, and I think this also happens not just with chaplains but the physicians that we’re training at University of Arizona. They’re full of information and knowledge, and what they’re trying to do is train to step back and to look at how they would create more space in the relationship, so they don’t [only] have to be a medical professional. It’s like in our ordinary lives. We’re sitting next to someone on the subway or on a bus or on a plane or in a café and we have all these ideas about who everyone is next to us and we’re filling all this space up all the time with all our fantasies about who everyone is and our feelings about that person. So prajna, this quality, reminds us that it’s such an amazing — It’s like coming back to the breath and realizing I don’t know, and there’s space before knowing that I can tap into.

Chodo: Do you have any beautiful examples of that?

Koshin: Well, right now and being with you and being here with all of you. We don’t know what’s going to happen next, and to me, that’s the place of creativity and freshness. We don’t know what’s going to happen and I can even feel in my body when I just bring myself to my breath, and I think that’s the practice and that’s what we’re going for here. Alright?

Chodo: Yes. Beautiful.

Koshin: What about idle talk?

Chodo: I love idle talk.

Koshin: <laughs>

Chodo: It’s so energizing when we get caught up in the spell of just gossiping and bitching about someone and making the other less than...

Koshin: An enemy.

Chodo: ...and making an enemy of the other and elevating oneself. *If I'm right, then they must be wrong.* Or rather, *they're wrong, so I must be right.* That feels great. So when I say I love it, I'm not really joking quite so much, because there is an energy about it and if I'm truthful that is kind of exciting and I get caught in that trap of not being mindful that I'm actually throwing all of these awarenesses into the toilet, right? Because I'm no longer being mindful. I'm actually not even in serenity. I'm getting caught up in the rush of, yes, making the other less than.

Koshin: Well, it's like the two precepts in our tradition about not discussing others' errors and faults and not elevating yourself, and this awareness really speaks to those, right?

Chodo: And to be aware that when we're in those kinds of situations, whether it's idle talk, whether it's right, whether it's wrong speech, I think they fall into the same barrel, that actually we're creating karma from that.

Koshin: What do you mean by that?

Chodo: Well our karma arises not just from the actions that we take.

Koshin: <snapping noise> <laughs>

Chodo: You felt that.

Koshin: Yeah.

Chodo: There was a reaction.

Koshin: Yeah.

Chodo: Because you're on camera, you laughed.

Koshin: Right.

Chodo: But possibly, it's not what you're feeling right now.

Koshin: Right.

Chodo: But our karma arises not only out of our actions, but out of speech too—that we create situations. Simply by saying the wrong thing we can create a really harmful environment. So we have to be very careful how we—

Koshin: Separate.

Chodo: —How we separate and how we interact with the other. How we are in relationships...

Koshin: All the time.

Chodo: ...all the time to each other.

Koshin: And that's like this kind of blindness that we have—that idle talk is really looking at how that impacts others, right? It's about words and deeds and how that creates causes and conditions that can create huge separations, and really, if we're talking about Zen and care, it really is what breaks down care.

It's like when we have ideas about who another person is, and then we fall in love with the idea and get all into it. It feels energizing. At the same time, it creates enormous separation. It reminds me of this great story about Mara, who is the personification of suffering or evil, and he was traveling through the villages in India and he saw a man walking in meditation, and his face was lit up in wonder. He was just really present, and the man had just found something in front of him and Mara's attendant asked what it was, and Mara replied, "It's a piece of truth." So this man who was practicing all these awarenesses had found a piece of truth, and his attendant said to Mara, "Well aren't you upset? Doesn't that bother you that he's going to see a piece of the truth?" And Mara says, "No, because he's going to make a belief out of that truth and separate and think that he has a piece of the truth that is someone else's." And then he says, "So I don't mind at all because it just furthers suffering." So whenever we create any kind of division, any kind of separation, we break the care in two. We create Heaven and Hell in the Zen way, right? Heaven and Hell are in each moment, and when we create a truth, we're separating. We're creating Heaven and creating Hell.

Chodo: —when we're making something inevitably true. *This is the truth. This is the truth.* This is how it is then, as in the story with Mara, it becomes a belief and we know where belief can take us.

Koshin: It's also about creating enemies.

Chodo: Right.

Koshin: To really look at why we need to create an enemy, an outside, an other... So often people feel like they themselves are the other—where you can get very attached to being the other and how other we are, and thinking that no one will understand us. That's another way that prajna works and can actually work as a balm if we can really practice with it. Coming back to what we don't know as opposed to getting so attached to what we know.

Chodo: So to be able to—even when we get to that point of what we think we know or what we perceive to be the truth, if we can step back from that and take the breath—because in that taking back, in that stepping back, we allow the possibility for something else to come in rather than going forward with this truth, this belief. So when something's feeling askew, then that's a great signal for us. When we're engaged in idle talk, if we're lucky, at some point it doesn't feel great, right?

Koshin: Or we're actually aware of what it feels like.

Chodo: Right. Yes. At some point, we're aware that, *you know what?*, it doesn't feel quite so great anymore, this idle gossip, this chitchat, and we can step back...

Koshin: Into the mundane.

Chodo: ...into the mundane, and maybe discover something very important about ourselves that we may think we're lacking in something that motivates us to take this action of engaging in idle chatter.

Koshin: Well, it's also what we were [talking about with our friend Marie Howe](#) about the beauty of the ordinary and how the ordinary can become so vivid. And what idle talk takes away from actually being with what's there: the shadows in this room, the contours of your face, the quality of this paper, how we're feeling in our body in this moment. So

idle talk takes us away. It brings that excitement but it actually takes us away from the exquisite ordinary and takes us away from what wisdom actually is.

Chodo: Well, I think we see this a lot, particularly again in the hospitals where you're walking to the room and you'll hear the nurse or family member say, "Hello, Joan. It's such a beautiful day today, isn't it?" Rather than, "Hello, Joan. How are you feeling? What's going on?" Getting caught up in some way of not connecting, and this, I think, is a different aspect of idle talk. It's a talk that keeps us from entering into what's really happening. So it creates a barrier. When we're involved in gossip, it's exciting and yet it's creating a barrier between me and the other.

Koshin: Right. I just remembered a quick thing that there's another part of idle talk, that we have so many social conversations that actually have no meaning to them. We'll ask people in the elevator, "Hi. How are you? Good?" You answer the question before you actually experience anything, and I think of that part of idle talk, that, again remembering that freshness, asking, are we idly talking or are we actually communicating and connecting using speech as a skillful way to actually say, "How are you?"

My dad tells this story about being in the co-op with this neighbor of his and he asked the guy, "How are you doing?" and the guy said, "Well, do you really want to know?" and my dad was taken aback by that and said, "Yeah." To me, that's the beauty of taking it in. He really received the question, felt it, and the guy and he had a very meaningful conversation when it could've been just idle talk, right?

Chodo: That reminds me of the photo series in the *Sunday Times* that Joshua Bright did. If anybody's interested, go to the Sunday Times, and google "[A Good Death](#)." There's a wonderful picture of the man that I was taking care of and I'm wheeling him down the street coming from a therapy visit, and in the same frame, there's a young woman pushing her baby in the stroller on the cell phone. So it's the opposite ends of engagement. I'm pushing John, talking to him in the wheelchair, and this woman is on the phone, and the kid is almost not even there. Just this kid in the stroller that's being totally ignored by the mother—but that's a judgment on my part. I realize that.

Koshin: No, but we're always doing both and it's kind of like a picture of the two sides, that we're always going between one and the other, inattention and attention, inattention and attention. To me, it's why it's a beautiful photograph—if you value one over the other, it's not as helpful as, *yes, it's sometimes like that and sometimes like this*. It's the two sides of practice, right?

Chodo: So actually, I just made the mother the other.

Koshin: Yes.

Chodo: I made her right and myself wrong.

Koshin: And we do that all the time.

Chodo: So thank you for it.

Koshin: <laughs>

Chodo: Thank you for correcting—thank you for showing me the way there, Koshin.

Koshin: But this is what we do for...

Chodo: This is what we do all the time.

Koshin: ...for each other. We have to, when we get caught, we really need good spiritual friends, and to care for each other on the way. I think a part of avoiding idle talk is also saying, actually, you're separating there. It's not just going along with things, but as a way of caring for you and how we are in our relationships. So it's about how we do that for each other, and so in this last week of practice together, we are going to be really looking at and discussing with each other how we play with—and really work with, in an engaged way—avoiding idle talk and wisdom.

Chodo: It's very difficult, though, for me. I find that we spend so much time on our cell phones, so we're in constant connection to each other, to our friends, to our relatives, to whomever, our partners, and I find that I'm guilty of having spent so much time on the phone during the day, whether I'm in the office or the hospital or talking to you or one of the students, that when I get home at night, it's almost like I've exhausted all the words and there's no room actually left to talk about the important things. "Hey, how are you feeling? How are you doing? How was your day?" Or maybe checking in with the news because I've expended all my energy on this thing—

Koshin: Idle talk.

Chodo: —that we call advancement in technology but we're losing something really important. I mean, it's just my opinion. As Bernie Glassman would say, "It's just my opinion, man." I have to watch that, idle talk on the cell phone, because how often do we really need to be on the phone? Twelve hours a day?

Koshin: Or do we have to really be—

Chodo: Or do we have to be hooked up with that thing in our ear?

Koshin: Or do we really need to—

Chodo: I haven't finished. Go ahead.

Koshin: I think it's also asking, do we really need to check our messages every four seconds?

So this week, what we'd like you to do—and we'll be doing this with you—is really looking at how we idly talk. It's filling up space and we won't be good at it. We'll fail together and we'll get up together and we'll practice together and just use it as a way to come back to our breath. So in this last week of practice we'll look at all the different forms of really just bringing in our awareness of idle talk as a way of looking at how we communicate with ourselves and others, how we care for ourselves and others through our communication, and how we can come back to that place of prajna, of before knowing, of wisdom.

Chodo: And hopefully in that moment, we will be able to take a look at why we're engaging. What is it that's so frightening that we have to fill each moment with idle talk? What is really going on that we could actually spend some quality time looking at, right?

Koshin: Right. It's been such a pleasure and we look forward to this week with you of conversation and engagement, and it's been terrific practice.

Chodo: Yeah. Thank you.

Koshin: Thank you.