



Okay, so good morning again. This is the second session of an online retreat with Tricycle. My name is Teah and I'm the teacher at the Brooklyn Zen Center—and we keep going.

We've finally reached the three skills that I was telling you about last time. The first one is meditation, so I want to say three things about meditation and the first thing I want to say is that when you begin practice the only thing that you need to be concerned about is getting yourself in the present moment. Nothing happens outside of the present moment so you have to be here.

And if you pay attention—if you paid attention last week—you might have noticed that a good deal of the time we're not here. We're dreaming; we're thinking; we're thinking of the future; we're thinking of the past; we're telling stories; we're talking about things. When you think about it it's kind of scary—most people are really not paying attention to what they're doing. It's funny. So the first thing you have to do is called *shamatha* practice. It's simply developing the ability to aim and sustain the mind on an object that you've chosen, period. It's called calming the mind. So, how do you do this? You take some kind of an object, usually we recommend the breath because it's there all the time, it's moving so you can be aware of it, and you pay attention, you aim the mind on the breath, and then you're going to slip away.

That's part of the process—you will slip away. Then the mind will wake up. Oh, that's the only important moment of this whole thing. At that moment you have to decide am I going to come back or not. Well, yes, you are, so you bring your mind back to the object of whatever you've chosen: could be posture, could be breath, could be a visualization, could be counting. It really doesn't matter. It could be your knee—your right knee. It really doesn't matter. Just pick an anchor and try to keep your mind there. When it slips away, which it will, it will wake up again. As soon as it wakes up, come back, and that process will go on for years and slowly, slowly you will get better at it and eventually the mind will habitually snap back to the present moment.

Just having a thought away will be what will trigger the mind to come back and that's what you want to develop. You want to develop a mind that, all by itself, is staying here—that's called *shamatha* practice. Whatever lineage you are in—Tibetan, fabulous lineage; Theravada, fabulous lineage; insight, fabulous lineage; Zen, wonderful lineage—they all start in the same place because you have to be present so that's your first job and that will take a few years.

It takes a while because you've let your mind do whatever it wanted to do for years so it doesn't even believe that you want to be present, so it takes some effort. It felt like I literally was holding



on to a gigantic bull and I said, “Come back; yes, I want to be here,” but gently. Okay, don’t fight but be firm and gentle—be here. That’s *shamatha* practice. Have to do it, and the neat thing about that practice is you begin to develop the ability to watch what’s happening because one of the reasons why you keep floating away is that thoughts are coming up that are catching you and you float away with that thought. One thought coming up is not a problem. It comes up. If you don’t do anything with it, it goes away. But what we do as a thought comes up, we grab onto it, and we start thinking and you’re gone so the first taste of freedom is when you stand as the observer.

The mind is settled and calm. When some thought comes up, you don’t grab onto that thought. You’re able to watch that thought come and go; watch an emotion, energy, come up, do its thing and go—that is the first taste of freedom. When that happens, that experience, that’s a wonderful sense of freedom and it’s easiest to do on a meditation cushion but then you take that ability and you go out into the world. It’s much more difficult in the world; it’s easier when you’re sitting. You take it out into the world and then you’re not so reactive and that’s an amazing, amazing step in practice, so that’s *shamatha*.

And then you can do some things. Once the mind is present, you can do something with it. So one of the things you can do with it in meditation is inquire. Inquiry is really important—that kind of curiosity of mind that I was talking about. When the mind is really stable and settled and wide and clear, like what Ajahn Chah said, “a clear forest pool,” then you can drop in a question: “What am I? What’s the difference between consciousness and awareness? What are the five *skandhas* that people are talking about? Is the teaching of impermanence true or not? I’m going to really pay attention and see.” You don’t do thinking here; it’s not analysis. The mind is calm and settled, and you just drop in a question and let it be in the back and listen.

Inquiry is important. And then the other thing that you can do is you can do what we call *shikantaza*, sitting; it’s called “just sitting.” It’s a little bit difficult to explain, but we will. So sometimes in a narrative it’s used as like the sky, sky mind. We all have this; it’s our original nature. There is an awareness that is vast and awake—luminous. It has a knowing quality. It’s very still, very quiet. That’s why we miss it. We all are that; we all are that mind. It’s there already but it’s quiet so we go right over it but it’s there, and if we settle in deeply, listening is a good way of doing this.

You settle down, the body is quiet and still, the mind is open, receptive like the sky, and clouds and lightning and thunder doesn’t touch the sky, thoughts, and emotions. All of it can be there and there is this knowing quality. At first, when that happens, we feel like we are the observer



watching these things, but when you're really settled that sense of observing goes away and there's just being. There's just this knowing quality and whatever is happening, right?

The instruction for that kind of sitting is: don't do anything. It's a very bizarre kind of instruction but it's true, and the reason is because, again like I was saying, before the egoic movement of mind, the doer is exactly what we want to dissolve and dissipate. Right? So any kind of doing, manipulating, grasping, controlling—anything that the controller wants to just keep going of itself—so that's what we want to release and don't do anything, just from doing to being.

So that's meditation.

Oh, I'm moving right along now. Okay, so the next skill that needs to be developed is what I call continuity of presence, but really it's continuity of mindfulness. The definition of mindfulness is to know what is happening as it is happening, but what we want to do is know that all day long, right? So even now I'm aware of my body; I'm aware of how my voice feels in my throat; I'm aware of my left shoulder blade against the chair, the weight of my body, the sense of temperature in the room, and the sound of the air conditioner. You just are here all day long.

And to develop that, there are tricks you can do because it's hard. It's really hard. So when I used to teach high school I used to use an online buzzer, a thing that just buzzes. You set it on buzz. I used to wear it all the time and set it. Originally I set it for 20 minutes but that was too much so I set it for half an hour, even an hour, and it would buzz. And of course I wasn't there, I was somewhere, but when it buzzed I would come back, come back, come back. On my computer screen saver I had “breathe,” so every time my computer would go down this “breathe” would come. It would remind me: “Oh, yeah, that's right. Okay, I'm breathing. Yes, that's right.” Or sometimes I used to rubber band these two fingers together. It was inconvenient but it would remind me to come back. Or I would put notes on the refrigerator—anything that you can do but if you put notes you eventually. You have to change the notes because eventually you don't see them. Anything you can do that reminds you to come back, do it because you want to develop continuity of mindfulness or continuity of presence. Those are my tricks.

This being present is very interesting. I used to play music, I used to play a flute, and I think all musicians know this place of being present without self-reflecting. Athletes, they call it the zone; rock climbers, they know this; skiers and dancers know it too. There are many things that we do normally in our life that give us a taste of this awake, aware, and present mind.



So in the beginning when you're playing music, you have to learn the scales. When you're learning the scales, for example, you're being present; there's a duality there. That's important. You have to try to be present first. This duality is not a bad thing but then eventually, as we say in Zen, "100 percent wholehearted activity" will come. And in that kind of activity there's not a separation between being mindful and just mindfulness or let me say presence, so there's a difference between being mindful and just presence. So there's a difference between playing and learning scales on an instrument, flute. The former is the doing part of it, the activity.

When you're learning the scales, it gets in your body. It's like when you play Bach on a flute. My hands were the music. It goes into your body. And when you know it well enough, when it's in your body enough, then as a musician you let go. And then you just listen, and as you're playing all you're doing is listening. That's when they say the playing is happening by itself—you're just listening as music is happening.

And at that time if something happens and your little, small mind comes up and makes a judgment ("oh, you didn't play that note completely right"), that small mind has to immediately be dropped; otherwise you'll make a mistake. Drop that because when flow is happening that little self-reflecting mind, that commenting mind. I'm just reminded of something else so I'll tell you in a minute. When that comes up that split happens and the flow is destroyed so that commenting mind goes away and then there's just activity, just the music. That's when you become the dance. That's when a rock climber is just the mountain and the activity of climbing or just the skiing or just whatever it is, just offering incense, just meeting a friend.

What I was going to tell you was I was in San Francisco some months ago, and when I go there I often stop and talk with teenagers are living on the street. I always want to engage and we're not separate from anybody. So I bent down and this young man—he was about 19, I think—and I started talking and so on and for some reason we started talking about his mind. He started talking about his own mind and he went like this: this niggling small mind, this judging mind, this mind of struggle, he called it the "itty bitty shitty committee." I thought that was really good.

We have to make friends with it; it's not an enemy. We begin to make friends with our own most difficult feelings, but I thought it was kind of neat because then he had some separation from it, right? It wasn't running him; he already had a sense of observing, which is what has to happen, right—itty bitty shitty committee.

Okay, so another thing to pay attention to is the quality of mind that you're bringing to an activity. Is it a quality of grasping? Are you already in a comparison mind mode, are you already

Teah Strozer  
Week Two, *Life Hurts: Responding with RAIN*  
April 13, 2015  
“How Meditation Helps”  
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not wanting to do whatever it is? So a sense of the quality of your awareness is very good to notice. Okay, so meditation and continuity of being present and then the third skill is RAIN, R-A-I-N. It's an acronym and now I want to talk about that because I find it enormously helpful.