



Buddhism is not what we call in the recovery world the easier, softer way. This practice is face to face with our own struggles—our own inner struggles and with the world as well, seeing the world clearly. As we become more sensitized through mindfulness practice, that's how we start to see the imbalances in our lives. We're challenged to take on these imbalances, and to see how we need to live differently. Often we follow along in our lives as some model of how we think we're supposed to be. Going to school and getting the right job and having kids, at some point in our lives we realize that we've made decisions that really didn't have anything to do with who we really were.

I remember when I got out of graduate school I went to a career transition workshop, and I was struck by how many lawyers were there. People who had obviously set out—gone to law school to make the money and get the job and the security—and just realized the suffering that was coming from that work. Obviously, there are happy lawyers in the world, and people who are really engaged in positive work, but it's one example of how we can get caught in something society is telling us we should do until we wake up to our own suffering. It's like the mid-life crisis that people talk about.

It's really a waking up, the waking up that the Buddha is encouraging us to do in every moment, to see how we can create suffering, or how we can create the conditions for ending suffering. It's not about necessarily big things like career change. It can be just in the thoughts that we are having right now.

This engagement is so vital in an ongoing way, and it's so difficult to sustain because of our conditioning, our habits. We have to look at ways we make routine our spiritual practice. That's a positive thing, by and large, but it can also become something that's just a routine, so that we're not really paying attention.

Many times, I have to admit, I sit down to meditate because I've been meditating virtually every day for 35 years. Many times I sit down to meditate, and it's not until I've been sitting there for 10 or 15 minutes that I actually start to meditate. Then I sit down, and here I am. I'm so used to

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this place. I've been in this posture. And so my mind just continues on the track it was on. I'm still thinking about what I'm going to make for dinner, or where I have to be later in the day. Or what I'm going to talk about at my talk tonight. It's so difficult to break out of those habits, to find engagement and ways of waking up.

This is why we continue to practice together. Why we continue to study. But one of the things that I've struggled with for much of my life is depression, which was something that started even before I started drinking and using. It wasn't even caused by my addiction. Over the years, I developed different strategies for dealing with it, as we do. I will say that being sober and working the 12-steps helped me a lot with that—having that community support and really just engagement and making an effort.

Depression is a great example of a disease that reinforces itself through its form, because what really helps you to break out of depression is being active and energetic. Depression drains your energy and makes you passive. So engaging—having engagement and a process of engagement—is so important. I've taken antidepressants, which have been useful at times, but not on a sustained level. Last year I was struggling again in a period of depression after several years of being good. I had a conversation with a Dharma teacher who just reminded me that I had resources, that there were things to do. It was like I had just put all that aside.

We can get very complacent in our spiritual practice and our healing practices when things are going well. We think, “Oh, everything's okay. I don't have to think about it.” Then, gradually, because of our conditioning, our negative mind states tend to creep back in. This is what causes relapse, of course, with addicts and alcoholics, but also with depression. The relapse comes with this disengagement.

Finding ways to be engaged is one of the really critical things. Not to overstate it, but this is again why we need people around us who remind us. I want to suggest a practice or a reflection now about change.



Go inside for a moment and just take a few breaths. Ask yourself, “What are the things that get in the way of your own engagement or your own process of change? What aspects of your personality or your habitual behaviors have stalled you in changing?”

Reflect on what's helped you to change when there have been moments of transformation or waking up. What were you doing, or what were the circumstances? What was going on internally or externally that really made that possible, that supported that change, that letting go, getting unstuck.

A third question is, “What can you do to cultivate those qualities that helped you let go? How can you sustain that? What do you see is maybe lacking a little bit or could be strengthened? Or what is there maybe too much of?”

Each of us has to find our way to transformation, to letting go. The title of this talk and the subtitle is about a recipe for change. Each of us has to find our own recipe, to some extent. There are various elements we can draw from. Some of us are extroverts, some introverts. Some people benefit more from interaction—a lot of work with the teacher. Others really need to practice on their own more. Some of us learn more through study, through reading. Others learn more through listening.

As you think about these questions about change, certainly there are elements that are vital. Awareness, and what we call rigorous honesty in the recovery world. Really being honest with yourself. What is really working? Where is pain coming from? Where is happiness coming from? What's working? What isn't working in my life?

Motivation: What motivates me? What can I use to motivate me? What do I really want in my life? How do I want my life to look? So often we create these boundaries around what we believe we can do. Do I believe I can actually do it? It may be too late for you to become a major league baseball player, but there are so many ways that we can grow and change that sometimes we just create these boxes for ourselves.

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Look at the possibility of change and what you really want in your life and know that getting that might be challenging. There might be things that you have to do that are very uncomfortable. But ultimately it comes down to a choice between just settling for a limited little life that's not too painful and having the life we really want and being willing to go out and take the risks to find that.

Finally, as I've been talking about, making that commitment: taking those steps, the practice of taking a vow. This is one of the really powerful ways of changing. Say, “This is a line that I'm drawing. This is what I'm absolutely not going to do. But this is what I'm absolutely committed to doing.” Look at the things that we can do. Take that first step.

Very often we tend to look at the end result that we want to get to. It might seem impossible when we're looking at that. I can certainly say that where my life is today—if I had had the hope to have this life 30 years ago, it would of seemed impossible. Of course, it was impossible except to do one day at a time—one breath at a time.

This is how we change. We take the next step.

One of the great challenges in any kind of growth or change is wanting to have the magical fix. We come to meditation thinking that it's going to fix us. But meditation itself, the form, doesn't do anything unless we engage it. It's not a magical fix. It's a sustained process that brings about transformation but only with our engagement. We think, “If I could just find the right job, the right relationship, the right medication then everything's going to be okay.”

But because of impermanence, everything is never okay. It's constantly changing. We get to a place of comfort and it changes. This is why engagement and continuous practice is so important.

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I hope these teaching are useful. I hope they open something for you. I hope that you will engage for yourself. Ask these questions for yourself. And I wish you real happiness and freedom in that process.