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*The Gift of Attention*  
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Hello everyone and welcome. Let's take a moment to arrive together. Just closing the eyes. Feeling into the body. And meeting our experience of this moment, without any judgment, with curiosity, with kind interest.

Sensing into the body. Resting attention into the body. Arriving with whatever is present for you right now. Whatever is unfolding, whether it's excitement, apprehension, tiredness or energy.

Can we give it our attention in this moment? Breathe with it. Soften the body space with and around it, and open to listening.

### **Exploring Dana**

Many of the Buddha's first teachings, to someone who was new to the practice, began with an exploration of dana. Dana means giving or generosity, but it can also have the feeling of participation, of contribution. The Buddha and his teachings would give someone the task of bringing dana into being in their lives, finding ways to act, to bring good into their own lives and to other beings and their surroundings. Creating a sense of harmony and connection.

As we do that, the heart opens. A heart that is open, a sense of harmony: These are quite good definitions of happiness, aren't they? An open heart. A sense of harmony between ourselves, others and our environment.

Simone Weil said, "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity." We use expressions like paying attention, giving attention.

Habitually, we are not conscious of where we give attention to, and we might actually not realize that we have choices in where we place attention, to what we give it.

In meditation practice, we develop this skill. When we pay attention to what most needs it to what is most aligned in most alignment with our aspirations, this feels good. It feels harmonizing, gathering. It brings a sense of contentment and satisfaction.

### **The Generosity of Attention**

When we pay attention, we can recognize that it is a generous thing to do, and knowing that and feeling that can be deeply transformative.

We can reflect in our own experience about times when we gave our attention to someone else and they were receptive enough to notice it, and what happens in that interaction. We can also reflect on experiences when somebody else listened to us in that way, gave us their attention fully and unconditionally. We can feel that right now as we reflect on it. We can feel how good it feels to give it, to receive it.

So this is worth engaging with. It's worth doing, and it's something that we can extend. Giving our attention to human beings, to other living beings, and to all aspects of our experience as a movement of dana. As a movement of generosity.

We can even adopt the view that anything that has arisen in our experience, has arisen to be met with kindness, has arisen to be met with our attention, with our generosity. This goes against the stream of our modern lives.

### **The Movement From Distraction to Gatheredness**

We live in an age of distraction, where our attention is constantly pulled in different directions to different things. And as we live that way, we are using our most precious resource unskillfully, in ways that do not support happiness for ourselves or for others.

But we can turn that around through our practice and through our engagement with this exploration of dana and generosity. Through meditation practice, we can develop a kind of happiness that comes from showing up to our experience, that comes from giving up inattention, in favor of attention.

The opposite of undivided full attention is distraction, to be pulled apart, to be separated. When we bring the gift of attention to the moment we're in, to the body, heart-mind experience, the body, heart and mind gather together. The opposite of being pulled apart, the opposite of being distracted.

In moments of deep happiness, body, heart and mind, the whole gang are together. And that supports a deep sense of well-being, letting go of being pulled into the future, or pondering the past. Coming into presence, coming into unity, with the gift of our attention at the front and center of our being.

Albert Camus put it so beautifully. He said, "Real generosity towards the future lies in giving all to the present."

So can we bring this full generosity of being towards the future, through being fully present in the present.

So hopefully we have some inspiration and a good sense of the value of the generosity of our attention. It may be worthwhile now to look at this movement from distraction to gatheredness in a more practical way. How do we do it?

### **Gathering in the Body**

We gather in the body, just as we did in the short meditation, settling the attention, bringing it in. Opening with kindness to meet our experience. This is what meditation is, getting to know our experience. Why? Because this allows us to then respond to that experience in skillful ways, rather than simply reacting from our habits.

An example of this might be feeling restless and agitated, whether that is in formal meditation practice or in your day. And without noticing this restlessness and agitation, without giving it our attention, we are just propelled by it. We're in its draw, impacted by it.

When we pause, gather our attention, give it to the experience, we can begin to feel. What is this restlessness? What is this agitation made of? There's the emotion, there's the thinking, but there's also a sense in the body. And when we bring all of those together and we gather in the body, possibilities open up.

We can open the spaciousness through the whole body. Have more space for that movement of energy to flow through. We can soothe and ease through the way we breathe, through how much space we have. And we can bring kindness and compassion to meet the experience.

As we do this, we're giving more of our attention, but we're also responding, impacting this moment of experience in skillful ways. Moving from that reactivity to more and more possibilities of happiness for ourselves and for others.

### **Attention as a Resource in Interactions with Others**

So we can see how this is relevant when we work with our own experience, but I'd also like to give an example of how this can become such a resource in interactions with others, in the places where we maybe experience friction with another, and how revolutionary this can be.

I remember many years ago, on our work retreat we were running in India, which was three weeks long, it felt very important to us as organizers and facilitators that people be there for the whole time, and we felt that we had really made that clear from the beginning.

Around halfway through the retreat, someone came to me and said, "Oh, I've just booked my ticket to leave, and I'm going to need to go two days early." I was so upset that I immediately

reacted, and even though I can't exactly remember my words, it was probably something like, "No, you can't do that."

And she responded back, and in her response, I realized that there was something underneath this which was more important than when she would leave.

So here's an example of the gift of attention. I paused, and I thought, *Okay, I'm going to give my attention not just to what she's saying, but to the tone of her voice, to the expression of her face, to her body language. What else is she telling me?*

Then I could hear, through giving my own attention, that she was finding being on the work retreat really, really challenging, and that there was a part of her that just wanted to get away. And so booking the ticket to leave two days early was about that. It wasn't about not respecting me or the other facilitators of the retreat.

When I was able to listen to that, which was a process of generosity of attention, towards her, towards myself, when I was able to do that, I could also move forward with her towards a solution.

I could ask her, "What would make it easier for you to be here? You can leave whenever you want, but what could make it easier and more beneficial for you to be here?"

When I remember the story, I can still feel it in my body. We carry these memories with us when we're gathered, when there's that generosity of presence.

I also remember that moment was completely transformative: for her in being on the retreat, and for me in my ongoing learning of practice, in the moment. I'll just share here that she ended up not only staying till the end of that retreat, but coming back in other years.

So hopefully we can feel this potentiality, this possibility of giving our attention through our own body, heart and mind, and then opening to include the body, heart and mind of another, to take in more fully what is unfolding in the experience, and from there, these possibilities of response, not just the reactive habit, but a wider range and a wider field of possibility.

So this is part of what opens up for us when we give the gift of attention to our own experience, to another, to life. And this enriches and evolves our practice in more and more ways.

### **Intention and Clarity in Attention**

Part of what can really support that is intention and clarity. So I may be in a situation where maybe I need to get the kids ready to go to school, and I have a call from work, and I need to get myself ready, and the dog needs to be fed, whatever. All these things are pulling at my attention at the same time.

And I engage as best I can. A great resource for us can be the gatheredness in the body as we do that. Can I have some of my attention, at least, gifted to the body, grounded in the body, as I answer, as I feed, as I contemplate, *does that need my response now, or can it wait?*

Once that particular set of circumstances ends, I've dropped the kids off. I'm no longer at home. I'm on my way to work. Can I just take ten seconds, a minute, to gather in the body, to give my attention to the body. Breathe, collect, gather. Maybe only ten seconds, but I do that, and that shifts the momentum from the distraction to the gatheredness, so that I can be gathered with the moments of necessary distraction—in the sense of attention being spread to various places at the same time—through intentionality.

And can I discern the difference between when this is necessary and an appropriate response to my life and when that becomes a habit? So I may be coming back home and noticing: I'm cooking and I'm checking my phone at the same time. Can I rest back and say, *Ah, this is an opportunity*. Cooking is just cooking, in the beautiful teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Zen master, washing up is just washing up.

Take those moments in our lives to gather attention, a gift of generosity to ourselves. And then when the phone rings and my mother needs something from me, I can shift that attentiveness from one task to the other, where that is possible.

### **The Power of Discerning Where to Place Attention**

So that power of discernment, when these are the conditions and I live in them, grounded in the body as much as I can, taking moments to pause when they're available, and to regroup and regather in the body.

Then noticing here's an opportunity where I can be present, where I can give my attention to presence. and embracing those.

This is the beautiful challenge of our times, and we can engage with them as a practice, as a process of growth and evolution.

Evolving not only ourselves and our own happiness, but the happiness and the well being of our species.

And if that brings joy, then see that too as an act of generosity, that can support all of us on this journey of being a human being.