What Are We Doing Here

Pascal Auclair · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 57:03

Good evening.

Tonight I'd like to take the opportunity that is offered to talk about what excites me about this practice, what I love about this practice in different kinds of ways. It might turn out that I'll speak a lot about mindfulness, following on Rebecca's talk last night and adding some things or repeating some things.

One of the first things that I want to mention that I appreciate a lot about this practice is the safe container that we actively create together here so that we can do this work of opening the mind and opening the heart. It's very delicate work and it needs a great sense of safety to be able to do this. In this community here, with everyone's participation, we help create that by sila, by our commitment to the precepts, by the silence we hold, the space, the solitude that we give each other. It's very beautiful, very unique to create that much safety.

Of course, it's relative to each one of us, how safe we feel. But one little piece that felt important to me to help create even more space for everyone to feel at ease here was to say that everyone who is here now is totally welcome here. Sometimes it's not that clear for some of us—like the others, they fit and I don't because of, you know? And the "because of," you can fill in the blank for yourself.

It could be a number of things and I'm going to name a few just to put them out there. It could be because of your ability or level of ability. It could be because of the state of your mind as you came here. It could be because you are here for the first time. It could be because of the color of your skin, the story of your people, your gender or gender expression or sexual orientation, your age. There's probably a bunch of things that I do forget, but I think it's good for me as a gay man to name this, to say, hey, it's a good place to be. This is us. This is the village that we're forming together, and it's made of moi, and it's made of you, and this is it.

I'll add a little thing: I'm aware as we sit here that it's pretty white on stage. We're all of Western descent and I'm aware of this. I'm happy to report that next year there will be one person who is African-American, a person who was born and raised in Uganda, and a person who lives in Sri Lanka. Maybe we'll be able to represent more of the diversity of human life and human experience and cultural experience. So just this little piece there.

There's a story that I like very much that I'm going to tell you. It's from the suttas. This young person—they could actually be male or female or somewhere in between even—is a deva, some kind of celestial being. They have a lot of youth to them and a lot of passion for discovery and investigation. They happen to run

into the Buddha. Their name is Rohitasa.

Rohitasa comes to the Buddha with a lot of energy. Reading about them, I feel the character there—full of life, very genuine, in a way naive and open. Rohitasa says, "Is it possible, sir, by walking to reach the end of the world, to reach the end of disease, death, sorrow? Is it possible by walking to reach the end of the world?"

And the Buddha says, "It is not possible by walking to reach the end of the world."

Rohitasa responds, "This is amazing. This is just amazing. I ask you, is it possible by walking to reach the end of the world in sorrow and in satisfaction? And you say very plainly, very directly, no, it's not possible by walking, by traveling to reach the end of the world."

Rohitasa goes on to say, "This is absolutely amazing, because I tried. I personally tried. And as a deva, I have special skills, special capacities. I can actually go really fast."

I can go faster than someone throwing an arrow. And they're very skilled, and they have the best arrow and the best bow. If they were to shoot an arrow, I can actually, by walking, just go faster than the arrow. I'm paraphrasing the sutta here, but pretty close.

And Rohitasa says, "I can actually, with one step, go from the eastern ocean to the western ocean. And I decided that I would actually reach the end of the world. So I decided to try this." And so he walked with his giant steps for a hundred years.

Rohitasa is very candid, I think is the word. It sounds almost like a report, like when we come as yogis to see the teacher. This yogi is describing everything in a very clear report: "I walked for a hundred years. Honestly, I stopped only to eat, chew, taste, to defecate and urinate." I'm telling you, that's in the sutta. It reports everything. "I stopped to rest and sleep a bit, but apart from that, I was walking, walking with the intention to reach the end of the world, and I never did. So I'm amazed that you, sir—I ask the question and you reply very simply: it is not possible by walking or traveling to reach the end of the world."

And so the Buddha adds: "It's true that it's not possible by walking to reach the end of the world. But without reaching the end of the world, it is not possible to put an end to suffering. And I will tell you one thing: the world, the beginning of the world, the end of the world, the path to the end of the world—it's in this fathom-long body." Rebecca used that expression yesterday. It's all within this fathom-long body with its perception and mind. This is where you'll find the world, the birth of the world, the end of the world. You can replace here in this text, if you want, the word "world" by the word "trouble" or "dissatisfaction." It's in this fathom-long body with its mind and perceptions that you'll find trouble, the beginning of trouble, the end of trouble, and the path to the end of trouble.

So it starts very vast—the world, walking for a hundred years, long distance—and it comes right to here. And this is what we're doing here. We're engaging in probably the next inner travel of Rohitasa, the

turning inward, reaching and exploring the world, its birth, possibly the end of the world or dissatisfaction, trouble, craving—in here.

I had long periods of doubt. I would sit long retreats and I would have this cloud that would come, sometimes for days, like three or four solid days it seems, this big dark cloud of: "What do you think you're doing? What are you doing here? Everybody is creating families and buying cars and putting money aside and living life, building careers. And you sit on your butt doing nothing all day. Who do you think you are? What do you think you're doing? You're not doing anything for society. What is this?"

These big, thick clouds of doubt would sometimes come to visit me. And it was so debilitating.

Until one day. There was definitely one day I was sitting with this cloud, observing this cloud, feeling the heaviness of it, feeling how this mind state was removing all capacities from the mind, stopping the mind from going further, from exploring. And I don't know how it came about, but at some point, from really deep inside of me, came the sense that this was noble work. That there was nothing more noble to do with the human life than to actually look at it, look at what it means to be a human being. What are the deep, hidden mechanisms of suffering, of entanglement? And not just look, but live in them, live through them, soak in them—these difficult mechanisms. And what are the mechanisms of disentanglement, of liberation? What is, in a way we could say, wholesome and unwholesome—from inside, from direct experience of it, of release, of entanglement.

After I had this clarity—this is how I would describe it, this clarity of vision that this was noble work to do—I don't think I've ever had that thought again. And this has been reaffirmed by seeing how this mind is learning how to cultivate

more freedom and what leads to freedom and release, slowly.

It's the patterns that create trouble for oneself, for others, for oneself inwardly, for others in relationships, but also in community, in society, in a global way, in a very large way.

And also witnessing this—this is where I feel extremely privileged and lucky. This is my job all year long: to sit with people, and a lot of it is actually witnessing. People expressing in their own words their discoveries about freedom and what leads away from it. And so I have great appreciation for the work that has been done here in the last six weeks by some of us, and by what we've started to do, some of us, in this second part. Somebody must know the number of hours we've been here.

My understanding of what we do is that we're learning about a technique. That's certainly one thing we're doing—learning about the technique to gain independence so that we don't have to believe anything. We're creating, training, making this tool that will have clarity, that will be able to pierce assumptions, preconceived ideas, concepts, dive under all of this to meet the world freshly with clarity so that we can see for ourselves what leads to what.

I'm amazed at that. It's not a system of belief. You don't have to believe anything that is said here. You just have to apply the mind in this direction so that you get this clarity of mind that can connect with reality in such a pure way that it can understand exactly what is what, what leads to what.

So maybe I'll bring another image that comes from the texts, describing part of what's happening here. You have to imagine on one long rope, maybe the length of the stairs here, six animals being tied at different lengths on the rope. So you have perhaps a crocodile that is tied to the rope here, and you have a snake here, and a dog here, a monkey, a hyena, and an eagle. Imagine all these animals find themselves tied to the same rope. The crocodile wants to go to the swamp. The snake wants to go to the grass. The dog wants to go to the city. The eagle wants to go to the sky. The hyena wants to go to the charnel ground. The monkey wants the jungle. All of these animals are pushing in one direction and another, and it's a big mess.

In this image that is used in the sutta, we say that what we're doing now is exchanging this situation we find ourselves in—with the six senses pushing in all directions. These animals represent the senses. Oh, I hear a little construction. I wonder by what date they'll be finished. Usually that size, what I've seen in the past... And then there's a sensation in the body—ah, that old familiar one. It's been there for so long. I wish... And you go like this, and then there's something that crosses the mind, an image, and whoops, you go that direction.

That's how a lot of us live our lives. We just follow in that direction for a while, and then in that direction, and that direction. It's not an easy situation to find oneself in.

What we're doing here, bringing mindfulness—the image that is used is that we put the pole in the ground, the stick very deep in the ground, and now we find ourselves with one rope for each of the animals. They will learn that the stick is so solid that it's not going anywhere, so these senses will learn to calm down and find rest for their own sake also. They will learn how to find rest.

And so that's part of what we're doing here: we're not following all the senses and sense impressions and contacts that we have. That's what this mindfulness is doing. One way that I like to practice, that fits with this image—I think the expression that has been used to describe this method is called guarding the senses.

The way it works in Buddhist psychology says that when there is a contact with a sound in the ear, or a sight—something seen—or taste on the tongue, and so on, mind and image, impression, thought—when there is a contact, there's a concept that follows. So I hear a sound, and it sounds like a hammer. It comes with this. And it says that often when there's a contact followed by conception, organizing of the world and naming of the world, there's also proliferation that can follow, especially if there's no mindfulness. So the mind can get lost in a direction until there's another contact and another concept and another proliferation that can come.

As we come on retreat, often that's what we find ourselves in the midst of: the version of all the animals going in all directions. But what we learn to do is actually keep the practice very simple and stay at the point of contact.

That might be something that will interest you. In the following days, that's something I practice a lot—staying very close, becoming intimate with the contact at the ear door, with the sensation of the breath, if I name some of the anchors that we use. This beautiful practice of giving, generously offering full attention to life as it's happening, as it's contacting the body with all its doors, all its sense doors.

What it helps do for me is cut through the self-obsession or fascination. I don't know if I'll be the only one around here plagued by that—what I'm going to do, what I think about this, what I prefer. It's as if I live a life with those glasses always on. What is my opinion about the person sitting next to me and how they should breathe? The pile of laundry and how much I'll put in there and keep for myself. The mind can be kind of obsessed with self-ideas and selfing. This is one beautiful way to cut through: to give full attention to the experience, the phenomena happening here now. Hearing. Somebody joining us right now, maybe. Breathing. You see the tendency of the mind to proliferate on ideas or on sensations, and then the practice of renunciation, of letting this go.

I remember in the first few retreats that I did, maybe the first retreat, somebody was paraphrasing the Satipatthana Sutta, the discourse that we use a lot to do the practice we do here. They were saying one finds a quiet place, sits down, and puts as a first value mindfulness in the forefront—presence, you could say, as a primary value. And dropping—that's the sentence that really stuck in my mind—dropping all concerns for the world. All kinds of obsession about the stories that we tell. The invitation is to drop it, to just meet, maybe in the first few days of this retreat, the experience in the body. Rebecca talked about this a lot yesterday. So dropping all stories, and again and again if we have to, to really come here.

To me, the image that you see of the Buddha behind me with this mudra of touching the earth has this quality to it also. In his experience, there were all these stories: Who are you to be sitting here? Who do you think you are? There's no point in sitting here. You're not going to find anything by sitting. And then suddenly, this touching the earth, coming back to something extremely simple. Not "Who am I in the world? Am I worthy of what will happen to me? What was I? What will I be?" Dropping all this and touching pressure on the finger, touching the earth.

To me, this is such a simple practice. It's amazing that this would be the doorway towards insight, towards revelations—I don't know if that's the right word—but discoveries about the world.

At Spirit Rock, another center on the West Coast where I practiced a lot and teach sometimes now, there's a little gratitude hut. It's this little kuti with pictures of all the masters that have taught us or taught our teachers. It's a very beautiful, inspiring place to stop by when you're dejected, to be beheld by these elders, male and female. There's a quote there by Ajahn Mun that for me is very, very central in practice. You might have heard this or seen it in the Gratitude Hut:

"In your investigation of the world, never allow your mind to desert the body. Examine its nature. See the elements that comprise it. See the impermanence, the suffering, the selflessness of the body while sitting, standing, walking, or lying down. When its nature is seen fully and lucidly by the heart, the wonders of the world will become clear. In this way, the purity of the mind can shine forth, timeless and delivered."

The instruction, the important instruction for me is: in your exploration of the world, never allow the mind to desert the body. Ajahn Mun was known to be a very realized master. So that's a statement I want to consider.

A personal story. When I was twenty-five years old, I didn't have any Buddhist practice, any practice of any kind. One day I went to the doctor and found out that I was HIV positive. At that time, there was no medication like there is today. A strong shock, we could say. The moment I was in the doctor's office and he said, "Your tests are... it's not good. You're not healthy actually. You have almost no immune system at all"—that was not my experience, my understanding, my perception of what was happening.

There was a big shock. Actually, the shock was a spiritual shock. It was a waking-up moment to the unsolidity of the world, I could say. My impression, my unconscious belief, was that I was young forever. I would not have said that, but that was revealed with this news. That was the way I was holding this—that I was young and was going to live forever, and also was healthy.

I was identified with health. And suddenly, all of this got shaken—very strongly. I was given a few years to live, and then I was sent back out onto the street. I was very much lost.

For the weeks and months that followed, it was extremely difficult to be in this mind. There was not much wisdom about impermanence, about things changing, about matters not being in our control. I didn't have references for this readjustment. I was lost.

I had one teacher—a drama teacher who was, at that point, the wisest person I had around. I went to see him and told him what was happening: "I don't sleep. I don't know what to do with this." Plus there was the shame. There were many levels of difficulty for me.

My teacher had gone to war before, and he said, "I found my place in a situation like yours, it seems, in the past. What helped me was to get out of the mind and connect with reality, because the mind was a dangerous place to be." Later I heard Natalie Goldberg say something similar: "Your mind is a dangerous neighborhood. Don't go there alone"—meaning go there accompanied by mindfulness.

He said to me, "What I did was decide to see colors—be very aware of red for a few minutes, then see green. Just to get outside of my mind, because it was not a good place to hang out. Maybe you could try this and see how it goes."

I didn't do the color thing. But because I had training in dance and movement, the body was something I knew well. So I decided to actually be present when I walked in the street, instead of thinking of my

problems. I trained myself. This was a survival kit. It was an emergency, so there was a really good incentive to practice.

I worked a lot at coming back into the body—feeling the body as I was walking, feeling the eating as it was happening, feeling the body laying down at night. Because the mind always wanted to shoot off into catastrophe, and there was not much wisdom available.

There's an interesting teaching that says when one is mindful, wisdom becomes available again—even shaky wisdom, even something you just learned about that isn't yet integrated. When there is mindfulness, even uncertain wisdom becomes accessible. But when an afflictive emotion creates disturbance in the mind, even well-established wisdom or values can be lost. Great anger or great desire can make me forget that there might be consequences to my actions or words, can make me forget that I actually value respect.

And in the other direction, if I bring mindfulness, I might gain access to so much more. This is the beauty of this practice—something I love about it. When I'm able to maintain mindfulness in the midst of an afflictive emotion, I gain far more than just being present. I gain access to patience, to acceptance, to friendliness in the mind, to hope that a solution is possible.

In the wake of mindfulness, several qualities are developed. This is what we're doing here all day long. When we apply mindfulness, we're inviting the power of amazing qualities of mind. We could name the seven factors of enlightenment: the quieting of the mind, concentration, equanimity, energy, curiosity, enthusiasm, and confidence—the sense that I can be with this, I can meet this moment, and this moment again.

We could name the brahmavihāras: compassion, the capacity to rejoice and appreciate. When we're present and something is precious, we don't bypass it or miss it. With full mindfulness, what is precious becomes outstanding. We're touched by a simple gesture of generosity, by the beauty of nature, by this capacity to remember, even for a moment, that I can be here. I don't have to push away what is difficult.

Compassion too is born from mindfulness. I was telling someone today in interviews that one of the greatest benefits of this practice for me is that I learned how to be with the difficult in a friendly, caring way. So much so that sometimes I feel like shit—there's anxiety or pressure on the chest, something in the heart-mind.

And because of the capacity to be attentive, it gives birth to compassion. "Oh, it's not easy, Pascal, to be this being right now." This caring quality becomes such a beautiful container that sometimes I feel happy. Like I didn't get what I want. The body is reactive. It's tight. It's contracted in the heart. There's dejection apparently, but there's such a beautiful holding, such caring, that it doesn't seem like it needs to change in any way. It seems complete.

Many years ago, I heard Jack Kornfield say—and I'm always taking a chance here because you know how

the mind will reorganize reality—but I think he was describing compassion as a state of happiness, as one of the expressions of happiness. And I remember thinking, that doesn't add up, because compassion involves being with the difficult. Happiness in my mind at that point didn't involve the difficult. It involved getting rid of it. But now I can see, touch this sometimes. It's like, wow, it's not easy being in here, but there's such a capacity to be with it that this is life happening without any problem in a way.

I'm a little random here. I hope that works for you.

Another thing that comes to mind that I cherish a lot about this practice is that there's not taking so personally what is happening. There's a very precise way that I want to name it just now. It seems like my job, part of it certainly, is to be aware of states of mind that arise so that I can appreciate and cultivate the ones that are helpful, onward-leading. And the ones that are bringing distortions, wrong perceptions—difficult to feel, but also having an influence on how I see the world, distorting the world in some ways—I can accompany these mind states towards the exit slowly, and not make it so personal. Not "I'm so like this, I'm so like this." Rather, "Oh, here is this state of mind that is here. What is the appropriate response?"

And this thing that I see sometimes arise, that I find so beautiful and I'm so thankful for, is that sometimes I'll see a state of mind arise in somebody else. In this practice that we do, we're invited to see internally and externally. In the sutta it says that: notice your mind state internally and externally. And one interpretation of this is to see it in other beings. Sometimes a mind state will arise in someone, and it's so not important that it's me having this mind state or them. That's not the way I understand the world anymore. It's just, wow, there's generosity. How beautiful is that? There's benevolence. How beautiful is that? Oh, there's agitation. There's dissatisfaction. There's closing down. Here, there—not so important. What is the appropriate response? Because this is something that we need to care about, either rejoice about or help accompany to the exit.

I've seen this develop with this practice. I like to think about this when I'm practicing here, that I'm not just taking care of this being, but it's opening this being, this capacity to accept, to consider what has arisen and how it can be treated, for lack of a better word. As I'm talking about this, it's not so important if it's there or here, but what to do with it.

For me, what comes with sati, with mindfulness, is this recognition that in this practice we're doing here, it's a different frame of understanding. It's not so personal. What I'm doing is not so personal. I'm studying nature, human nature. This is very central for me in this practice—that I'm looking at phenomena, how phenomena arises, what different phenomena create.

I think it's very important that we have this right view as we practice, that we're here doing something universal. We're looking at what worry creates in the mind, what landscape it creates, what devastation it creates. We have the chance to see this in a very close and intimate way in this being, but this is not personal. You read suttas from 2,600 years ago, and people have the same things that arise—the same

agitation, the same doubt, the same insights. There's nothing personal about it.

It's very important when we start to practice, or continue practice, however you want to see it, to remember that this is where we're discovering human nature, nature itself. I even find myself using images here. Talking in terms of mind states, sometimes I find myself in the national park of fear, or in the national park of calm and peace. Am I going to own this?

What am I going to do with this? This is nature that is happening—the nature of calm. Let me get to know this in the same way that I would want to visit a national park. Let me feel this, see this. I think of it more in terms of savoring, tasting. Let's take time to taste resentment, to really know from the inside the experience of resentment. Not the story about it, not the fascination with the object, but turning the attention the other way and feeling the effect of resentment or any other mind state, discovering it fully.

And I truly believe that inside of us, with this mindfulness, there is wisdom that can become available. If we touch intimately enough these mind states that I've been talking about, when we touch them intimately, that's how we can deeply realize: this is not helpful for me. This is entangling. I don't have to think about it—by soaking in it, it becomes obvious on a skin and bones level that this is not liberating. And when I have full intimacy with another state of mind that is beneficial, I don't even have to think about it. If I'm in it, I will feel that this is for my good, for the good of others. That's certainly been how it's shown up for me. And so for me, there's this commitment to actually know what is happening as it's happening, to know the resistance, know the agitation from within.

So maybe I'll finish with a book that perhaps some of you have read by Anālayo—it's about the Satipaṭṭhāna. It's a study of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, this text that we're using to guide the practice we do here. It's a big volume, it's rich, there are so many details, and it's just an amazing work on all the ways one can understand this sutta. At the very end of the book, he says—again, this is from my memory—we could sum up this book or this discourse using four letters, and that would explain or define the practice. Are you curious about the letters? The letters are K-C-K-C: Keep Calmly Knowing Change.

He says that this defines what we're doing here. And every one of these words is very important. The "keep" points to continuity—this beautiful continuity of practice, of being there while brushing teeth, going upstairs, putting on shoes, feeling the body, being aware of the mind state. What is the mind state that is putting on the shoes? The mind state of rushing, or the mind state of connecting with reality?

I'm reminded of a retreat I sat where every day they were inviting us to go slower and slower, and at some point it was really slow. Sometimes I was feeling a little agitated, and Chaz was one of my fellow yogis on the retreat, and he was so slow. Sometimes he would just pass by and I wanted to get in front of him in the corridor because he was so slow. And then I would say to myself, "Get on his bus. Pascal, get on his bus. Let him drive." I would let him go by and just get behind him and learn from Chaz to slow down.

One of the teachers at that retreat would come to the dining hall at lunchtime and say, "I see you guys

oozing out—you're leaking, you're leaking. Such beautiful practice you do as you sit and walk diligently, and then at lunchtime you're just oozing out." I remember hearing that and reflecting, and he was inviting us to bring as much awareness when we were sitting to eat as when we were sitting in the hall. So many discoveries I made by bringing attention—and not forcing, this is extremely important—not forcing but tending towards presence. Sometimes you check out for a little while because there might be some benefit to it, but doing it as a choice—that's the thing about presence: you can choose to go off or to stay. When there's no mindfulness, it's just habitual ways of being.

So, keep calmly. The "calm" points to the equanimity we're developing, the capacity to stay balanced with the pleasant and the unpleasant, or even the neutral—maybe more challenging than anything. The capacity to stay calm, equanimous, with having what I want or not having what I want, with things turning out not exactly the way I want. Keep calmly knowing—"knowing" is sati, the mindfulness. And "change" is all the fluctuations we see in sensations, in pleasantness and unpleasantness, the fluctuations of mind state, of perception. I'm the best yogi. I'm the worst yogi.

"Get me out of here." "I want to stay here forever."

Keep calmly knowing the change of thoughts, perceptions, feelings, states of mind. The change of moment—present moment disappearing, being replaced by a new one. The change of the quality of consciousness, the new consciousness arising. Consciousness of feeling the feet now. Consciousness of hearing. Just seeing this.

Continuez calmement à connaître le changement.

Continue calmly knowing change.

Thank you very much for your attention. Maybe we take just a moment to feel what it is to be a human being right now.

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