Boredom

Rebecca Bradshaw · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 57:25

So as promised this morning, tonight's talk is on boredom.

Last December, I went to the dentist to have a root canal and root canal prep. The assistant and I got to talking, and there was some question about whether I needed to actually have the root canal done then. But I said I travel internationally sometimes, and not places where I'd want to get an emergency root canal, so I should probably do it. She asked what I do, and I said I teach meditation. She said, "Oh, I tried that once. I wound up thinking, is this it?"

So I said to her, "Well, sometimes it's boring." And she was so relieved when I said that—that that was a normal experience. Sometimes it can be helpful to know that nothing super special is supposed to be happening here. It's just life, ordinary life.

Trungpa Rinpoche is known to have said, "Practice is boring, boring, boring." It might be a little bit like this show I heard is on cable television in England called *Watching Paint Dry*. What they do is paint a wall a different color each day, and then you can watch it dry for 24 hours. I found that kind of interesting, actually.

A few years ago, a friend of mine sent me a link to a blog titled "The Dullest Blog in the World."

"Opening a Cupboard Door, October 16, 2005. There was a cupboard in the corner of the room. I reached out my hand and gripped the door handle. I pulled the door towards me, thereby opening the cupboard."

"Scratching my knee, September 10, 2004. My knee had a slight itch. I reached out my hand and scratched the knee in question. The itch was relieved, and I was able to continue with my activities."

It goes on and on like that, and I couldn't help but think it sounded like a meditation retreat.

So we come to meditation and it seems to be pretty ordinary—opening cupboard doors and scratching itches. And the question occurs to us: can anything be happening here? I came here, I came to meditate, to be enlightened, and something's supposed to be happening. And really, I'm just bored.

Practice definitely ruins our self-aggrandizement plans, our plans to get something. One teacher said it's anti-credential. It really doesn't give us any place to hang our ego on. We can't get a PhD in Dharma announcing our great attainments, right? Because then the next sitting or the next day, it's not so great anymore. I have to take the sign down.

It's actually great that it works that way. A big part of practice is learning how to connect with what's

ordinary, with ordinary life. And this doesn't come as easy as it sounds like it should, perhaps.

What happens when we meet ordinary life? What happens when we contact experiences that are fairly neutral, like the breath, for example? We talk a lot about vedana—pleasant and unpleasant—the conditioning, how when something's pleasant we tend to grasp at it, and if it's unpleasant we tend to push it away, try to get rid of it. We talk about how this conditioning is obviously problematic, the root of much suffering.

We don't talk as much about neutral conditioning, so I'm going to address that a little. What happens if an object is neutral and there isn't mindfulness? We space out. We disconnect. We're not interested. We start to run on autopilot. So the conditioning with neutrality—neutral experiences, neither pleasant nor unpleasant—if there isn't mindfulness, is to not be engaged. And then we get bored. We're not engaged, so there's some disengagement, and then there's boredom. It's not so interesting. We're not so interested in it.

Boredom is anathema in our modern culture. I wonder if many people don't quit meditating simply because they're bored. We'd almost prefer any mind state but boredom. I know on my first long retreat here, I had really strong pain across my shoulders and neck. And I actually preferred being with that pain to being with the breath, because the breath was, to me, boring. At least the pain was interesting.

I love John Cage concerts. I've mentioned them in a number of my talks because I think he was one of the great avant-garde composers. He came up with these very unique musical compositions. One of them, called *Empty Words Part Four*, was two and a half hours long and debuted in 1974. He said, "I gave a performance of my piece called *Empty Words Part Four* for the students of Chögyam Trungpa at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. The piece goes on for two and a half hours and contains long silences of four or five minutes duration. Then out of that silence, I say just a few letters of the alphabet, following a score which was written through chance operations from the Journal of Henry David Thoreau. Meanwhile, there are these very faint images of Thoreau's drawings being projected on a screen behind me, but they are very dim and hardly change at all, perhaps once every twenty minutes. I thought it was an ideal piece for a Buddhist audience, but they became absolutely furious and yelled at me and tried to get me to stop the performance. The next morning, I had a meeting with Chögyam Trungpa, and he asked me to join the faculty at Naropa."

So I thought about that—why were they so upset? Maybe they were bored. They were hoping for something more interesting than four or five minutes of silence and images that change every twenty minutes. I think they couldn't bear it.

One more little story like that. I had a student last year who taught a graduate class on something to do with education, and I think it had something to do with mindfulness too. Each class they started with a ten-minute mindfulness meditation, and at the end they asked the students to evaluate the class, including that component. She said half the students liked the meditation and the other half didn't like it at all. Some got angry that they had to do it. One even calculated how much those ten minutes cost him from his fees.

Again, I wonder if they were just bored. Not much happening, and they wanted something to be happening.

So what is boredom? Let's look at this in a little more detail. I don't see it as a single mind state. I may be wrong, but I don't believe it's listed as a mind state in Buddhist psychology. I see it as a mix of different things happening. And I hope you got a chance to look at this yourself today after I suggested it this morning.

The first thing with boredom is there's usually some pulling back, some disengagement from what's happening. Then there might also be in the mix some low energy, a lack of interest, a lack of mindfulness, and perhaps some aversion and craving. Quite a mix in there. Sometimes it's a sign that our expectations aren't being met, that our agendas—which Winnie mentioned so beautifully last night—aren't performing very well. When all this happens, there can be a sense of restlessness, and the mind starts looking for something interesting or stimulating. And then we really have a multiple-hindrance attack on our hands.

So it's important to be mindful of boredom. I think sometimes we try to skip over the mindfulness of it because we don't even want to know that it's there. How many times have you read the signs in the bathroom? The mind is craving stimulation. So we cruise the bulletin board, hoping maybe there's something interesting up there. I had all the signs here memorized everywhere, I'd read them so many times. I think it's a pretty common experience—that wanting something to be happening.

So let's look at some of these pieces of boredom. We could start with what you might call our garden-variety boredom, which is simply not being interested, not engaged with what's happening. Sometimes it's useful to know why that's the case. Why are we not engaged? Why are we not interested?

Sometimes this has to do with low energy. Every day of our lives, and every yogi day, has ups and downs of energy. You've probably noticed that. There are times when you feel kind of "on," and then there are times where the energy is quite low. During those times when the energy is low, sometimes it's hard to find the energy or the interest to really connect with what's happening, and then we might get a little bored.

With low energy, one thing we can do is wait it out—to keep going and wait it out, or to bring a kind of light attention to what's happening while we're waiting for the energy to change. Or we can raise the energy, perhaps walk outside or walk faster. Or connect with something pleasant. Sometimes that will re-energize the mind. Drink some caffeine. Splash cold water on your face. All kinds of things that we can do to bring the energy up. And then often, if this is the cause, we'll be interested again in what's happening. We'll engage again.

Sometimes it's good to know, as a yogi, your general energy cycles, and you can figure out what's most helpful to do at certain times. So if at the same time every day you find yourself getting very bored in your meditation, it might be that that's just your low energy time, and maybe that's a good time to do more

walking meditation.

I used to, when I was on retreat—I'm a morning person, so I wake up ready to go, I have lots of energy in the morning, and then it kind of goes down as the day goes on. After six o'clock, I'm not the world's best yogi. I used to save all my chores, my yogi tasks, for the evening because that was a time when I didn't have as much energy for sustained interest in sitting or walking meditation. If I had to clean my room, that's when I would do it. Sometimes I'd have a yogi job that I could do in the evening. Or if I had to take a shower, I'd take it in the evening. It was just a way of working with my energy cycle.

So that's low energy. What about just pure lack of interest in what's happening? I was thinking about this—it's like a preemptive giving up on the moment. Boredom assumes that we know what this moment is going to be like, and it doesn't have anything to offer us. We already know this breath. We know this step. We know the taste of this food. We've already given up on the moment.

If we look more closely as we investigate boredom, we see that it's not so much the object or the event that is boring, but rather the quality of mind and heart that we bring to our engagement with what's happening. So boredom can be a sign that we need to bring closer attention to what is happening, to get more engaged, to get closer, and out of that the interest returns.

One yogi mentioned last week that he had this fascinated interest in the breath. So obviously the problem isn't the breath, right? It's our attention to the breath.

I like to ride my bike for exercise, and I go on rides near my house along country roads. There are weeds and grass on the side of the road. Mostly I didn't pay much attention to it—kind of boring, right? Weeds and grass by the side of the road. Then one year my partner gave me a book of wildflower identification as a gift. So I got interested in wildflowers, identifying them and seeing what was around. There was this one patch of road that I started to pay attention to, and over the summer, I identified about fifteen varieties of wildflower in a few square feet of roadside grass and weeds. I got really interested in it by paying attention. And I saw it so differently. When I just rode by, it was just some weeds. When I really paid attention—wow, there was a lot going on, a lot more depth, you could say, than it seemed on the surface.

Our meditation can be the same. We think, "Oh, just another breath," and kind of cruise the surface. And then what happens if we bring more interest? We get closer. Get closer and see what's really happening. We see in meditation if we can bring a fresh mind to our experience. When we live in the conceptual realm, things are actually more boring.

When we live in our ideas of how things are, it's pretty stale. There isn't a lot of change. But when we get closer to what's actually happening, we see that no two moments are alike. Every moment that appears in life is new and fresh—a new combination of causes and conditions. It's never been here before, and it's never going to be here again. Different and fresh every moment. How could that be boring?

I read that there's a German word—I don't know what it is, and I probably couldn't pronounce it if I did—but it translates more or less into English as "defamiliarization." The idea is that when we give up on the moment prematurely, there's a sense that we already know what it is, that we're familiar with it. Defamiliarization is looking at things with fresh eyes, as if we hadn't seen them before.

I know that before I started meditating, I thought I knew what rice tasted like. Then when I started to meditate here and had rice for lunch and began to actually taste it, I'd think, "Wow, a mouthful of rice is not just a single experience." Chewing a mouthful of rice reveals so much. It's this mind state of not assuming that we know what an experience is going to be. It's attuning our attention to a slower pace of life, you could say.

I read a book last year called *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*. It was the story of a woman—I think she was a meditator—who had this illness where she had to lie down all the time. She couldn't even stand up very long because strange things would happen with her blood pressure. For a long time, she was bedridden. A friend gave her an aquarium with a snail in it, and the book is all about her friendship with that snail over the course of a year. She talks about how her attention got really quiet, so that it was at this pace where being with the snail was interesting. She could hear the snail eating—the sound of a wild snail eating. And snails don't move very fast, right? But it was enough for her.

I think about how quiet the mind must get for that to be enough.

In many ways, on retreat, we're in the same process—letting the mind quiet and attune to this slower level of life that we have here, this less stimulated level of life. The attention gets subtler rather than needing events to be more dramatic.

Charlotte Joko Beck is one of my favorite teachers. She was a Zen teacher, no longer alive. Here's a story of hers about paying attention:

"Many years ago, I was a piano major at Oberlin Conservatory. I was a very good student—not outstanding, but very good. And I very much wanted to study with one teacher who was undoubtedly the best. He'd take ordinary students and turn them into fabulous pianists. Finally, I got my chance to study with him. When I went in for my lesson, I found that he taught with two pianos. He didn't even say hello. He just sat down at his piano and played five notes, and then he said, 'You do it.' I was supposed to play it just the way he played it. I played it, and he said, 'No.' He played it again, and I played it again. Again, he said, 'No.' Well, we had an hour of that, and each time he said no. In the next three months, I played about three measures—perhaps half a minute of music. Now, I had thought I was pretty good. I'd played as soloist with a little symphony orchestra. Yet we did this for three months, and I cried most of those three months. He had all the marks of a real teacher—that tremendous drive and determination to make the student see. That's why he was so good. And at the end of three months, one day he said, 'Good.'"

Think of the attention needed to do that over and over and over again. He was waiting for her to really

hear. He was waiting for her attention to get that attuned.

It's kind of like what we're doing here, right? Over and over and over again. Most days it's a breath, a step, eating, thinking—over and over and over again.

We see if we can attune our attention to be interested in all of it, even the very ordinary.

Sometimes when the interest is low, we can ask ourselves questions to raise the interest level, to help us connect more with what's happening. We drop in questions that pique our interest, and the idea isn't to answer the questions or to think about them, but to have the questions draw us closer to our actual experience. Again, it's that getting the attention closer.

A question might simply be: What's this? Or: Who am I? What's the attitude in the mind? How does it change? Is clinging present? We don't stop and think—we use those questions, or others that work for you, to connect more with our actual experience.

We can also get interested in boredom itself. If that's what's happening, we can get interested in it. As I said this morning, let yourself be thoroughly bored. What is that experience like? What's happening in the mind? What's happening in the body? There's probably some sense of pulling away or some disconnect. Perhaps there's aversion present, or craving.

I'd like to move on and talk about the possibility that aversion and craving have a lot to do with boredom. In the Shambhala tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, they talk about hot boredom and cool boredom. We're going to explore those for most of the rest of this talk.

Hot boredom is boredom as an experience of subtle or not so subtle aversion or attachment—that's what's going on underneath, craving or aversion happening.

Let's look at aversion. Sometimes what we call boredom is actually aversion. We're pulling away from the present experience. Sometimes I'll ask myself, what's wrong with the present moment? Again, not to answer the question, but simply to look at what's happening so we can get interested and connect with that experience of pulling away.

I remember one retreat where I watched, in a single breath, how many times I wanted to not be here—to fall asleep, to disconnect. We all wish to be present, and we might as well acknowledge that there's some ambivalence about that. There's also a desire not to be here, and sometimes that's what's happening when boredom is present.

Or we may be experiencing fear about the relative lack of stimulation. It seems like it leaves way too much room for trouble. Our societal answer is really to fill up space. We're not used to so much space and quiet and lack of stimulation.

There was an article in the New York Times, an interview with a CEO of Disney named Roger Iger. It's

called "Quiet Time." He says: "I get up at 4:30. I like the quiet time. It's a time I can recharge my batteries. I exercise and clear my head. I read papers and look at email and surf the web. I watch a little TV all at the same time. I call it my quiet time, but I'm already multitasking. I love listening to music, so I'll do that in the morning too when I'm exercising and watching the news."

That's kind of the pace of modern life, right? Maybe it's not that extreme for all of us, but there's some sense that that's what we come from. And then we come here, and it's a little different. Our quiet time is a little different.

It can be a little shocking—the lack of stimulation. We're really used to moving fast. Sometimes I like to think of a retreat as a technology cleanse. For some people this is really a practice, especially as the years pass and the constant stimulation of technology becomes more of a reality in the modern world. For some people it's genuinely a practice to come here and let that go.

I've noticed in recent years that yogis can have a really hard time letting go of using cell phones. I'm not directing this at any specific yogi, just to make that clear. I think about it a lot.

I think about it as a teacher. How can I convince yogis to let go of using technology during their time at retreat? And I wonder sometimes if this difficulty in letting go of technology relates to something deeper. I wonder if there's a sense that when we engage with our technology—whatever it happens to be—there's a way we re-solidify the self. When we come here and there's so little happening, there isn't that much to shore up ourselves. I mean, obviously we can find things, but there's not as much as out in the world, out in the outer world.

I wonder about that sometimes. When there's less stimulation, less happening, there's a sense sometimes of the pause or the gap. It's not so filled in with who we are or what we are. It's so open, and sometimes it's so frightening. It's so unpredictable, because that's how life is. And yet it's also a doorway to freedom. So we find the courage through meditation to leave some gaps—leave some gaps in our plans and life—and to see what happens. To open to the moment just as it is.

A number of years ago, I went to the end of a Thich Nhat Hanh retreat where you can take the precepts and just come in for that part. I wanted to take the precepts with him and the group. It was at six-thirty in the morning and two hours from where I lived. I got up early at three-thirty or four and drove fast and hard to get there on time. I parked my car and was rushing up to the tent to make it in time for the precepts. At that moment, Thich Nhat Hanh was coming from the other side with his entourage. The way he walked absolutely stopped me in my tracks and was my best teaching of the day.

I'd never seen anybody walk like that—completely in each step. There was no sense of him being ahead of himself. I was definitely on the other side of the spectrum that morning, so I think that's why it made such an impression. It was like a step, a step—just here, just here. I think of that sense of being fully just here as the antidote to boredom. It's the opposite of boredom. It's that contentment and willingness and

openheartedness in just this moment. It was my biggest teaching of that morning, and I've never forgotten it.

So that's one kind of hot boredom—aversion, not wanting to be here. Then the other type of hot boredom, related and which I may have already touched on a little bit, is craving—wanting something to happen that isn't happening. In this kind of boredom, we're waiting for something interesting to happen. It's a kind of impatience. We want to get something from our practice, and we want to get it now.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya said, "Boredom comes when we want results too quickly." I think that's related to this craving. The moment isn't giving us what we want, so we're not so interested in it. We want something better. We want a new and improved moment, not the one we got. Or at least we'd like something dramatic that gives us a good place where we can hang our sense of self—and a good-looking self, too, we hope.

Sawaki Roshi said, "No matter how many years you sit zazen or meditation, you will never become anything special." I love this. It's fantastic. It means we can give up that project. It's such a relief. Or Pema Chödrön tells of the time she met her teacher, Chögyam Trungpa, and he told everyone present that if they'd come to get their act together, they should just forget it because they never would. That just makes me happy. Maybe for some of you it's a little disappointing, but wow—it's so much work to try to get our act together. It's so much work to try to be something special. It's so much more relaxing to be ordinary. And if we hope meditation will make us special, we get disillusioned pretty regularly, don't we?

With this kind of hot boredom, the boredom that has craving in it, we pretty much miss life waiting for something else to be happening—something that seems more worthy of our time and attention. But where do we draw the line between what parts of life are worthy of attention and what parts aren't? I read a story about a man who calculated how many hours of his life he spent tying his shoes and putting on his belt, and he decided it was too much. He bought only shoes with Velcro and pants that didn't need a belt.

So where do we draw the line? Here on retreat, we obviously pay attention when we tie our shoes and put on our belt. We think it's worthy of our attention. This attention helps us cross the divide of disconnect.

It helps us to connect to our lives just as they are.

One of the stories of the Buddha, or the Bodhisattva Siddhartha, tells of how he engaged in many quite ascetic practices, pretty extreme practices. And then at one point, he remembered a time when he was a child. He was trying to understand: what's the way to do this meditation? What's the way to be with practice? And he remembered sitting under a tree during the harvest festival. It was a very ordinary moment, but he recalled being very joyful—just being there under the tree, being ordinary. It changed his whole practice, remembering that. He dropped his ascetic practices and came to a more balanced approach.

So you could say he changed his practice into something quite ordinary. And many enlightenment poems

describe a moment of ordinariness. There's nothing super special happening.

One of my favorites is Patacara, one of the nuns from the time of the Buddha. Most of the nun stories involve pretty difficult lives. The women who come and become nuns—their lives contain so much suffering. Patacara lost her child, two children, and her husband and her family. Lots of suffering. And so she comes and she meditates for years and years. At one point she says, "I've done everything right, and I followed the rule of my teacher. I'm not lazy or proud. Why haven't I found peace?" A question we might ask.

Next stanza: "Bathing my feet, I watched the bath water spill down the slope. I concentrated my mind the way you train a good horse. Then I took a lamp and went into my cell, checked the bed, and sat down on it. I took a needle and pushed the wick down. When the lamp went out, my mind was freed."

Completely ordinary. Bathing her feet, sitting on the bed, putting the lamp out. So you don't need to get anywhere that's super extraordinary. Just connecting with life.

With hot boredom, there's this edge to it. There's a certain discomfort—the aversion and the craving. As we know, they're not exactly pleasant mind states. So there's an edge of discomfort to the hot boredom.

Now I want to move on to what we could call cool boredom, which is pleasant. Perhaps we can't even call it boredom, but for the schema here we will. This cool boredom is more like what we call dispassion or disenchantment. And it comes from a deepening wisdom about how to relate to this world of change that we've taken birth into.

With cool boredom, again, there might not be anything super special happening. So it's the same scenarios, but the relationship is different to what is happening. We're connected. We're engaged. And there's no need to be anywhere else than right here and right now. There's an absence of craving or aversion. Cool boredom is not so far from peace.

Perhaps the first hint that we're relaxing more into cool boredom is that we start to get really bored with our stories. All our stories about me, me, me, me. The same stories. At a certain point we kind of wear them out.

Leonard Cohen, the singer, was a Zen monk for quite a number of years, and he writes about this really well. He says, "What happens in meditations that last ten, fifteen hours is that you run through your top ten erotic fantasies, ambition fantasies, revenge fantasies, global ratification fantasies. You run through them all until you bore yourself to death, basically. And the faculty that produces opinions and snap judgments and unrealistic scenarios of your own prominence—after you run through them for a number of years, they cease to have charge. They bore themselves into non-existence. You see them as diversions from another kind of intimacy that you become more interested in. And that is what Socrates said: know thyself."

I love that. Your stories bore themselves into non-existence. Basically, you start to get not so interested in your drama. You see that meditation isn't so much about accumulation of things and events and experiences, but rather the letting go.

So this is closer to what we call equanimity, or the non-reactive heart and mind, the balanced heart and mind. People can relate to this differently. Those who have a more wanting-type personality, they're not so sure what they think about equanimity. Sometimes it's close to boredom for the wanting types. They may be thinking, "Where's something fun happening here?" Now those who are more aversive types, equanimity and this calm and quiet of this cool boredom—it's like, wow, thank God. This is fantastic. My aversive mind is not going nuts for a change.

So it's kind of interesting how the different types may look at it. Being an aversive type, I understand that one very well. It's like, "Oh, the mind's quiet—yay!" And the more wanting types might be, "The mind's quiet... where is something? Where is something fun?"

So this kind of cool boredom is closer, as I said, to disenchantment. I love that word, *disenchantment*. The spells get broken—the spells of our own drama, stimulation, excitement. But it's not detachment. I want to make that clear. It doesn't mean that we don't have passion for life or love or compassion. It doesn't mean that we turn into something flat. What happens is we wear out the more afflictive dramas of the mind. And when we wear them out and we're not quite so interested in them anymore, then the more wholesome factors of mind—like love, compassion, calm—can come forward.

So this disenchantment is not about detachment, but about engagement. We're engaged. We have a full engagement with this ordinary life, the whole spectrum of life, with balance, with calm. And we start to see that all that arises passes away, that none of it can be truly owned. So there's no point in getting too dramatic about it all.

It's a subtler kind of happiness than the happiness perhaps of sense pleasures or stimulation. The heart and the mind cool off. It's like taking a dip in a cool lake on a hot summer day. It's refreshing.

From Jack Kornfield's book, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, this is by one senior Lama. He said: "Perfection must be around here somewhere. Where is it? Is it the next experience or the one after that? My true practice is patience, not wanting anything special or unusual to happen. As soon as I see striving and expecting, I know I've lost the great perfection. The hardest thing I still have to pass through is a realization that there is no final perfect condition to rely on. It is all fundamentally insecure and changing. You don't learn this quickly. You have to let go into this ordinary perfection again and again."

So with this cool boredom, there's a sense that we can settle into the present moment—all of the seemingly insignificant moments that make up our life. We don't need that next hit of entertainment. And so there's a sense of contentment and simplicity.

Many of you probably had moments of that, tasting that on retreat. I would assume moments where it

doesn't really matter what's happening, but you settle, come right into the present moment, not wishing or wanting to be anywhere else. And there's such a sense of joy. It breaks the spell that our happiness depends on what's happening.

So there's another John Cage concert. It's called *Four Minutes and Thirty-Three Seconds*. And basically the person, the pianist, comes on stage, sits down, opens the piano, and then closes it and sits there. I think it happens two or three times. And nothing happens. That's the piece.

I mean, nothing happens in a performance sense, but a lot happens. There's the rustling of programs. There's the sound of the siren out in the street.

There's the thoughts and wishes of all the people there, perhaps their movements. The composition is what's happening in the hall for those four minutes and thirty-three seconds. It's just ordinary life. I heard that he got quite a reaction for this one.

Sometimes I think of our meditation retreat as one long John Cage concert. It's not four minutes and thirty-three seconds—it's eighty-eight days, or however many days it is. And the composition is simply our lives, moment after moment. As we sit here, hearing, thinking, seeing, breathing, sensing. Just ordinary life.

In this quieting process of settling into our practice, we see life as it is. It's always changing, flowing, not personal, mysterious, undefinable, fresh, awesome, full of spaciousness and freedom—when the boredom is of the cool type.

I'll finish by reading about one more John Cage concert. This was from a book called *Slow Movement*:

"Another marathonic musical event is underway in Halberstadt, a small German town famous for its ancient organs. The local St. Burchardi Church, a twelfth-century pile that was sacked by Napoleon, is the venue for a concert that will end in the year 2640, sponsors permitting. The featured work was written in 1992 by John Cage, the avant-garde American composer. Its title, appropriately enough, is ASLSP, or As Slow As Possible.

How long the piece should last has long been a bone of contention among the cognoscenti. Some thought twenty minutes enough. Hardliners insisted on nothing short of eternity. After consulting a panel of musicologists, composers, organists, theologians, and philosophers, Halberstadt settled on 639 years.

To do justice to Cage's piece, the organizers built an organ that will last for centuries. Weights attached to the keyboard hold down notes long after the organist has left. The ASLSP recital began in September 2001 with a pause that lasted seventeen months. During that time, the only sound was that of the organ bellows inflating. In February 2003, an organist played the first three notes, which will reverberate through the church until the summer of 2004, when the next two notes will be played.

The notion of a concert so slow that no one who attends opening night will live to hear the final note

clearly strikes a chord with the public. Hundreds of spectators descend on Halberstadt each time an organist comes to play the next set of notes. A guide described the 639-year rendition of As Slow As Possible as 'a challenge to the breathless, haste-ridden culture of the modern world.' As we walked away from the church, leaving the organ to fill its vast lungs, he said, 'Maybe this is the start of a revolution in slowness.'"

So perhaps we can have our own revolution in slowness here at IMS—our own John Cage concert. Eighty-eight days, we'll call it, or forty-two, settling into our ordinary lives with engagement, kindness, interest, and a cool heart and mind.

Let's sit for a minute.

Just this moment.

Just this ordinary moment.

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