Instructions: Letting Go

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So if we want to expand our path, expand our sense of the possibility of what the path can be for us, what can open from the path, then obviously our practice needs to expand and our understanding as well needs to expand. A lot needs to expand, in fact—heart, soul, sensitivity. So it's asking quite a lot, this expansion of practice, asking for a lot of elements or threads to be woven together as part of the development. It's necessary. And that comes, like everything else, almost inevitably, gradually.

Already on the retreat we've introduced two or three threads, at least. We have the practice thread of cultivating this well-being in the energy body just as much as we can at any time. That's a kind of thread of intention that can be there at any time. We call that samādhi—gatheredness, harmonization, well-being. That's one thread. And that brings nourishment, brings deep nourishment to the body and to the mind and to the heart. This just dwelling, resting in this permeated well-being. That's a really important thread of practice.

The second thread is again related to the energy body but it's really using the energy body to be in touch with and to care for what's happening in the emotions. So the energy body as the indicator but also the vessel of care or one of the vessels of care for what's happening emotionally. Really important as a thread in practice.

And then yesterday we introduced the whole thread, the direction of imaginal practice and working with images there. And we talked about the balance with two-ness, between self and other, self and image.

So those three threads already, and they weave together like a rope is made of different threads. They support each other, you can move between them. So part of developing the art of practice is not only developing the art of each thread, but the art of moving, navigating. How do I approach this sitting or this moment or this walking? What's going on? Which thread will I explore? So there's a somewhat improvisatory element involved in that.

Now, add another thread, but it's a thread that you already know, that you're well familiar with—the thread of renunciation. So we're stretching what practice can be, but it relies on the basis of what we probably already know from our Dharma teachings.

So renunciation, letting go. It's all good and well and what we're trying to say is very important and fruitful to play with trusting desire at times. This is part of what this retreat is about. What if I trusted? What if I regard desire in a different way and approach it in a different way? And if you like, follow it—follow it in a sense, not necessarily act it out, but follow it in the psyche, in the being with the

sensitivity, for example, in imaginal practice and we'll talk about other possibilities.

So that's great and we really want to offer that and open up that possibility as something that's not commonly offered. It's great and all very good, and you need more volume. And at times we want to just cool down, turn it off, let it go, drop it. Really, really good. Really kind. So to have these options, not to be stuck in any option, and just always bashing away at trying to do the same thing, always on one thread, on one tack of practice. We have this fluidity, this flexibility that we're slowly gathering skill and art in.

So sometimes, either you just discern, this is the wisest thing to do now—drop it, let go, let the desire go, go somewhere else. And other times, you might just deliberately try to explore that mode of dropping and letting go. So there's this fluidity and discernment that we need. We're slowly developing.

I want to remind you of that possibility and stress its importance today. As I said, really a kindness. If you like, the capacity and the ability to let go, to drop desire, is developable. In other words, it's something that with practice, with care, with attention, develops. We get better at it. We get more confident that we can let go of desire if we want to, when we want to. That confidence is really important as well.

Just to offer—and we could talk about this for weeks in fact, but just four possibilities. Probably you know them anyway. So rather than get into a whole extended thing and where this might lead, just four practice possibilities.

So the first is come back to what's nourishing. Come back to a nourishment practice. So what's a nourishment practice? Well something like loving kindness is a nourishment practice.

whether the loving kindness is directed towards yourself or towards another. Let's say, if I'm having a hard time here or I can't let go of something and I think, "I'll give myself loving kindness," maybe that's really helpful. Maybe I give someone else loving kindness. Look, it's got to permeate me on the way out. I'm going to get soaked in that loving kindness as well. So don't always think it has to be you—just loving-kindness mode will be nourishing.

When we talk about samadhi, that's almost by definition a nourishing state. I'm just going to hang out in this field, in this bubble and make it nice and warm and just as comfortable as can be and just dwell in that, let myself rest in that and be nourished by it.

Often we grasp at things and we can't let go because our level of nourishment, the reservoir, is too low. The water is low in the reservoir. You understand? So I'm looking out everywhere: What can I get? What's that? What about him? What about her? What about this? What's for lunch? And there's the anxiety of endless grasping coming from needing more nourishment. You understand? So indirectly taking care of the nourishment takes care of this kind of endless grasping and craving that's part of the human condition.

So, anything that brings any degree of yumminess—metta, samadhi, calmness, the harmonization of

energy. What happens is our muscle to let go, just drop it and come back, whether that's the breath or the energy body or the metaphors or however you're doing it, just the more in our life we practice just this thing, and just drop it and come back, drop it, even if it feels completely futile, over time that muscle gets stronger. We get better at just dropping and returning. So to have faith in that—it's very, very simple.

Let me qualify that a little bit now and ask you: what is your tendency, what is your historical tendency in regard to that kind of practice and desire and dropping things? So you might be, historically, you look back at your years of practice and you see, "I tend to drop a lot and come back to my nostrils or whatever it is, or my abdomen or whatever it is." Or you might be the opposite: "I tend to be a very investigative type and I'm always going out exploring what's going on. I don't give much attention to developing the well-being and the nourishment."

So what's your tendency? What's your pattern? And sometimes it's good to just—okay, I realize that's my tendency, let's practice the opposite. Let's learn to lean the other way. You understand? So again, eventually in the service of this flexibility, we have just a multitude of directions possible to us. We can tack in any direction, we're free, we're fluid.

So, in this case, both the exploration of eros and desire, as we're opening it up, and also the letting go and the coming back. Always going the letting go route, as I think I said in the opening talk, as a way of living, it ends up being a little silly. It doesn't kind of cohere as a path of practice. It doesn't make sense. It's not our life and it doesn't fully serve our life. So we need some discernment here. Always going after desire and exploring eros and opening to it and letting it open us will also be somewhat unbalanced, and it will—if I do that, I won't be able to open other doors, for instance, the door of deep emptiness exploration, because that involves letting go of clinging.

Okay, so that's the first one, is just come back to something nourishing. That's the first possibility, just come back, come back, just drop it.

The second one is also a little bit related to nourishment and really it's to do with the possibility that sometimes what's happening when we're chasing after something—"I really need that thing, I really want that thing," or the mind is just distracted that way—what's actually happening is that there's some pain underneath the desire. The desire is not actually the primary thing. I don't really care about those chocolate cookies or whatever it is. What's happening is I feel lonely, or what's happening is there's grief, or there's heartache, or there's boredom. It could be something quite subtle as boredom, and we're disconnected from that heart state, and then we're going after this thing as a way of smoothing over, covering over what's going on. And we hope that somehow—if I can, it's not conscious of course—if I can disconnect enough I'll maybe get better.

No, we need to connect. Come back, come back, have a look at the heart. Something there might need caring for. And caring might just be connecting, which means just touching it, just holding it, just holding it in a caring awareness. That maybe is all it needs.

The connection heals. The kindness in the connection heals. And in being connected, we're more grounded and naturally step out of being chased by our desires. Coming back to what's painful might feel daunting, but the connection itself begins to slowly soothe what's painful. It starts to heal it. Then there isn't this sense of being propelled by some emotion that we're not fully conscious of. Does that make sense?

So the second option is to look at the emotions. If you're troubled by a desire, have a look at the emotions underneath. Give them some caring attention.

The third possibility involves recognizing that when there is craving, that craving is uncomfortable. The craving itself is dukkha—it's not an easeful feeling. There's tension and pressure that we feel when there is craving. You can feel it actually, certainly in the mind, but you can feel it in the body and in the energy body. The craving itself is dukkha.

Sometimes what we're craving—whether it's a cigarette or a drink or whatever it is—it's not even so much the thing that we're craving or the pleasure of it. We're craving the relief from the discomfort, the tension, the pressure of the feeling of craving. So when I get that thing, the balloon of pressure bursts. And it's actually that relief we're seeking. It's a kind of aversion again driving us, similar to the second practice thread. It's an aversion to the underlying emotion, or an aversion to the craving itself. We just want relief from that.

What's possible is getting in touch with that feeling of the discomfort of craving—the pressure, the tension of it. Where do I feel it? Sometimes you can feel it in the whole body, buzzing with that energy. Sometimes it's much more subtle. But it's really helpful to notice that craving is dukkha. Craving not only leads to dukkha—it is dukkha.

And what does this pressure need? All pressure needs is space. So I create more space around that pressure. I let it bubble away, this discomfort, but I give it more space in the awareness. If it's a pressure cooker and we make it bigger, the temperature goes down. That's how pressure cookers work—they create pressure and that heats things up more. So you create more space.

Just let it be. Let it be uncomfortable. It's going to be uncomfortable. Like when you stub your toe, you just have to give it some space for a few seconds, and it does its thing and then peters out.

So what happens here is this craving, this discomfort of craving, the pressure of it—I know it's unpleasant, I just create space around it and let it bubble away. It will rise, get more intense, and then reach a peak. Then it just subsides. And then it's gone, then you're free.

Now it might come back. But every time you go through that whole cycle—because you've given it space and not been dragged into action by it or into following the mind's proliferations—every time you do that, the whole cycle, the whole peak gets less. The intensity and grip of that craving on the whole system gets a little less, gets a little weaker. Make sense?

So that's the third possibility: noticing the discomfort, noticing the pressure and giving it space, just giving it space. Learning to tolerate, developing our capacity to tolerate the discomfort of craving.

This gives us confidence. You go through that cycle and you see, "Wow, this is possible." The strength of the being grows and the confidence of the being grows.

A fourth and last possibility for now is that a little bit of reflection can really be helpful.

So we get caught in wanting this thing or that thing, or this situation to unfold, or that person, or whatever it is. And how many times have we been through this before? How many times has it really satisfied us? Sometimes a little bit of reflection can be really helpful. What is this thing? What is getting this thing really going to give me? Am I really going to be fulfilled getting it? These are all very standard dharma approaches—you should be quite familiar with them.

Sometimes it's a matter of going deeper into what I want. Is this thing what I really want? Do I even really want it? I'm so caught up there, but is that really what I want? What I deeply want? Recognizing it's not what I really deeply want, there can be more ease in letting go.

Sometimes it's remembering how often in the past we've gotten what we wanted, but it ended up being not quite what we had imagined it might be before we got it. Surely. Almost always things turn out differently than what we think. So it's like bringing that wisdom at the starting end instead of at the end end. It's like, "Oh yeah, wait a minute. This relationship, this whatever—forget about it. It's not going to make you completely happy." And if we're exploring desire and opening to that, it's not because we think it's going to make us really happy. There are other reasons.

Lastly, there's just the reflection on impermanence. This thing will change. I will change. What I want will change. This thing will change. Change, change, change. Impermanence. Just reflecting on that. Sometimes beginning to notice impermanence, beginning to look at beginnings and endings. Lunch comes and then it goes—where has it gone? The retreat comes and then it goes. Everything. Interactions. Mind states—"I really want some of that samādhi they keep going on about." It comes and it goes.

All the sense contact, it all comes and goes. Impermanence happens on all time scales. Lives come and go. Death comes. Birth, life, death. Galaxies come and go. Mind states come and go many times over a day. Relationships come and go. Moments come and go—these words right now, how many different sounds, moment to moment.

So sometimes just inclining more towards impermanence—we're not really going to do that too much on this retreat, but it's a possibility—just going into that mode where everything's impermanent, and one lets go more.

Related to that, because everything is impermanent, everything is dukkha, everything cannot ultimately satisfy. So another possibility is going into a mode where whatever comes up, it's just dukkha, it's just

unsatisfactory. All it means—it's not a philosophy of life, it's just a kind of gear, a possible thread you can pick up. Half an hour, an hour, ten minutes, whatever comes up—the sensations in the back, dukkha; the sides, dukkha; the sounds, dukkha, unsatisfactory.

I'm not saying that is the reality of things. It's a mode of looking. It's a way of looking. And there's just letting go, letting go. Why? Because things cannot satisfy. Just let go. Let them come, let them go. Very, potentially very beautiful.

This sounds like it might be a recipe for misery, but actually it's the opposite. Something really—I know that many of you in this room understand this—very beautiful opens up in practice, what it can reveal for beings. But that's a more extended possibility.

So we have these threads we're weaving together in terms of expanding the path. We have quite a few threads already. Don't get overwhelmed, but learn to navigate between them. One thread is this business about renunciation, which you can approach in different ways.

In a minute it's lunchtime, and I'd like to offer a thread within a thread. I invite you to take food, taste, smell, and sight as themes for exploring the senses and desire in relation to the senses. Mealtimes can be excellent places to investigate and explore these teachings.

We'll pick this up at several points during the retreat. For the starting, entry-level approach to this practice, we'll work with our theme of renunciation for today. One way of approaching this whole arena of how the senses engage with food is to look at it from the perspective of renunciation practices.

What this might mean is taking at least one, but perhaps several mealtimes, meditatively. There will be a lunch queue, and you may find yourself at a certain position in that queue. What happens in terms of the movement of craving in relation to where you are?

You can stand there in the queue and be aware of craving, if it arises. It might be craving for the lunch itself. It might be craving with a fear component—will there be enough left when I get there? Will all the good food have gone? This too is part of craving. You can simply be aware of that.

Standing in the queue becomes meditation—just opening to these movements of mind and heart. When you have the food and you're selecting it, remain aware of your relationship with taking. Do I fear that I won't have enough and pile the plate high? Am I stingy with myself? There's so much to discover in our relationship with food.

Then there are the smells and sights. This word *vedanā*—one translation is sensation. The sensations when food is in the mouth, or the smell, will give rise to hopefully mostly pleasant sensations. But this is quite interesting. If you really meditate on the food, on the sensations arising in your mouth, what's actually there?

There are explosions—vivid explosions of taste. Not much else. Gaps between them. What is the mind

building up around the whole experience? What does it think food will be? Actually find out. Be close with the sensation.

What happens with unskillful craving is we get caught up with the mind's idea of what an experience is, instead of being at the level of sensation. There's taste, there's smell, there's sight. I invite this practice as a starting point, and we'll develop it further with food as the days go by.

You're probably familiar with this approach. I simply invite that practice—it could be now, could be at some point—but do at least a couple of mealtimes like that. At least a couple, and we'll continue from there.

But enjoy lunch, dear friends. Thank you for listening.

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