

When we stop trying to control

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Samsara is showing itself to us very clearly right now, in its nature of not being controllable, not bending to our wishes. And as someone said, you can turn that. It's like, no, the universe doesn't owe me anything, which is a much easier and more comfortable way of holding it, if we can remember to do that. But it's unavoidable, isn't it? To see right now, there are so many challenges in the world right now. It just keeps getting crazier and crazier and crazier. But we don't have to play that game. We can't control the outside, but we do have some agency about what is right here, in our own hearts. That's why Metta is such a deep and abiding practice and refuge, because it brings us to that place of, no matter what is going on out there, of wholehearted well-wishing anyway. We're standing with wisdom that not everybody can be happy, safe, protected, at ease. That won't happen; that's not realistic. So without any demand that everybody be happy, or wish that it come out the way we want, but just holding the brokenness of Samsara in our hearts and wishing well anyway is quite a beautiful refuge. And yet, it's not easy, is it? So we're faced with, in this mind we each have, our own particular patterns of reactivity, our own particular patterns of reactivity about all of that, whatever that is for each of us. Some version of greed, aversion, delusion. Greed, trying to distract ourselves with pleasure, standing in front of the refrigerator looking and going, "What can I eat?" And eating something and realizing, "Well, that's not going to do it." Or maybe it's aversion, just getting cynical and angry. This one is very familiar for a lot of us. Or even outrage, you know, it's like, "How could they do that?" That's a form of aversion. They do that because they do that. It's just the way they are. Now what? So maybe it's aversion. Maybe it's just checking out, going into a little bubble of, "Okay, nothing's happening." Yeah. Resting in kind of a deluded sense of, "Oh, it'll be okay." Maybe it won't.

So our patterns of reactivity are unique to each of us. And what you brought up on powerlessness really is a strong, strong seed of greed, aversion and delusion, because we don't like feeling that. It's a very vulnerable place. It's a very tender place. It's a place of understanding. I mean, this is one particular manifestation of Anatta, not-self. If phenomena were a self, we could decide which way they go. And this is just right around us and within us, but all alone outside. So we at least—and it might not feel like a blessing—but unlike people who have the illusion of global power, they don't really actually have it. We know. I can't do anything to change Gaza or Burma. Oh, it's tragic what's happening in Burma still. Or the floods here and there, or Nepal. Just heartbreaking, amongst a hundred other things you could read if you opened up the newspaper. The powerlessness we fall into when we see that can be either wisdom, or a correct understanding, or a source of real suffering. This is where we have agency.

One of the things that happens when we're anxious, and powerlessness brings up anxiety for many of us, is trying to control things right around us, trying to control our inner experience, or our families, our workplaces, our food intake, or whatever it happens to be. We try to control it. There's something in the United States called helicopter parenting, where parents are overly protective of their children, won't let them out of their sight, control every aspect of their experience. I have to say I'm so glad I grew up in the '60s and '70s. We were feral. We just went where we wanted, did what we wanted. Our parents trusted we'd get home, and we did. But today people can get arrested in the United States by letting their kids walk a mile somewhere. It's crazy. And people get so overly vigilant and overly protective and overly controlling of their children. And we might roll our eyes and go, "Oh yeah, I wouldn't do that." How do you relate to your inner children? Yeah, your experience, the being inside here, we kind of put a label on as "I", "me". Think of that

as your children and notice how much control you try to exert on what's going on in there. Remembering Anatta, we can't control it.

So working with this sense of powerlessness begins here. In our sitting practice, for example, how do we relate to the mind and heart when we sit down and close our eyes? What happens for you? I was noticing this last night. That's why I wanted to talk about it. It was kind of funny. I'd had a kind of full day and I sat down in the evening, and the mind was very active, busy. And the rising and falling of the abdomen felt like it was about 10 kilometres away, down there or somewhere. I was living in this cloud right up in my head. I'm sure this is a very familiar feeling for most of you. And the first minutes of the sitting, I tried to force the mind to go down there. Helicopter parenting. It's like, "No, you have to pay attention." I chuckled to myself, actually. It's like, "Oh yeah, right. I know that." Things are the way they are, moment to moment to moment. If we try to change them because we don't like it and we want it to be another way, do you think I was successful in trying to get the mind to go down to the rising and falling of the abdomen? No! It just got tight in there. And we all know this in our heads, but we have habits. So in the practice, it's even just in that simple, uncomplicated thing of paying attention without, you know, the huge karmic pain of the world. It's just, where do I pay attention? Even in that little tiny place, there's helicopter parenting. And when we relax and surrender into what is, and give up trying to control, and just relax, eventually, eventually, if there's intention, presence, mindfulness, unification, concentration, these all fall into place, right as we want them to, but we can't do it. We can't force it. We can't be that helicopter parent. It takes a certain amount of confidence in the process and in the unfolding to do that. And it's so interesting to watch. It's like this gradual opening. And it happens by itself.

And it's the same with the whole of the practice, from our very beginning steps all the way to the realization of Nibbāna, and the cultivation of Metta Bhāvanā, the same thing holds. And it's a delight, isn't it, when eventually we can relax, and we're no longer looking down on experience, but unified with it. There's no separation. There's just mind and body and knowing. Or there's just Metta, regardless, no matter what. Likewise, the same can happen with pain, physical or emotional. And this is where the helicopter parent can really come out. It's like, "Oh, I might be injuring myself." And then, you know, we try to do everything we can to avoid doing that. Now, with physical pain particularly, we do have to pay attention to the body and understand our physical limitations, understand where there might be injury. But here's where the anxiety can really, really kick in in a very interesting way. Physical pain is constructed in the mind. We don't have in our body pain receptors. There's pressure, heat, cold, touch. Pain is a phenomenon that is constructed in the mind.

I was reading this really interesting story, a woman who is a pain researcher in California, who wrote about these two examples that totally, totally blew me away. These construction workers had each, in different ways, been involved in accidents. Two of them had been involved in accidents. One was using a nail gun and the thing misfired, and the nail went flying into a wall on the other side of the room, and the recoil, I guess, hit him. I'm not sure. But he didn't know. Okay, okay, and then he just went on with his work. The other guy lost his balance and stepped onto a nail that was coming out of a piece of wood, a big, big nail that went right through his boot, top to bottom. Of course, extreme pain. They took him by ambulance to the hospital. In the case of the second guy, when he got to the hospital and he took his boot off, the nail had gone between his toes. There was no blood, no injury whatsoever, but he had been in extreme pain. The guy with the nail that hit the wall, a week later he goes to the dentist. He's got this funny aching in my tooth. "I'm going to have a look." And the dentist takes an X-ray, and there's a nail embedded in his jaw. What's going on there? What's going on there? It's the perception of potential danger. That's one of the biggest functions of pain. The body is telling us: danger, danger, danger. If you keep doing this, it's going to hurt. You know, it's going to cause damage. Sometimes that's true. Sometimes it's not. So discerning that is a huge part of working with pain, physical pain, in the practice.

I saw last night how that thought of danger, just the thought of it, can create a surge of pain. I was sitting and I was using a bench that I'm not used to using. Some of us wanted to sit here up in the hall after the retreat was over, so we were up there together. I just grabbed a bench and I was sitting on it. It was this strange, rather beautifully constructed bench with a curved bottom. I just sat on it and wasn't really paying attention when I sat down, actually. In a little while, my left knee started hurting, and I don't usually have pain in my left knee, and it started hurting. And I was being mindful of it. And as I was aware of it, the pain got stronger and stronger and stronger. This is not an unusual phenomenon for me. It happens. And as I was watching it, it kind of dulled out a little bit as there was more concentration. And then the thought arose, "Oh, this is that knee I twisted three weeks ago, and it's hurting in the same place. Maybe I'm really exacerbating that injury and it's going to..." As soon as that thought arose, the pain exploded. It went from being this dull thing to the whole body. It spread, it went up and down, it got really strong. And I thought, "Oh, wow. Now, a sample size of one, I know. Just because they're happening at the same time doesn't mean there's causality there." But I put the scientist away for the moment and thought, "Yeah, the mind just constructed that." And I kept sitting with it, and it dulled out again as I just paid attention and that thought went away. And no, I didn't hurt me. So you can watch this in the practice.

And the helicopter Yogi can come in at that moment. It's like, "Okay, I have to, I have to, especially if you're doing a longer retreat." And, you know, you think, "I have to be able to sit for the next month or whatever." And there can be this incredible kind of sequence of micromanaging. We micromanage our practice, how we're sitting, what we're sitting on, where we're sitting, what we're eating, all in an unfortunate attempt to try to control phenomena, rather than just understanding them as they are, which is the task of the practice.

Likewise with emotional pain. And this is where it can get really quite challenging, because emotional pain, especially when it's based in trauma, especially serious trauma, can overwhelm us in an instant. And this is where control is impossible, and we really see it. But then not to try to control that either is the task: just to be kind and back off and do what we need to do to actually just take care of ourselves. Not to control experience, but to take care of ourselves. And any of you who have that kind of phenomenon that's familiar in the practice will know what you need to do, will know what backing off looks like. This is really important, really vital in our practice, to be able to surrender to those places where the mind is just likely to go off the deep end.

This is another aspect of disengaging from being a helicopter Yogi, which is surrender. Surrendering to the fact that, yes, there are places in the mind that are dangerous, that we can't push ourselves into, that we can't force change on. Dangerous in the sense that we can get overwhelmed. Not dangerous in other senses, but more because we just get overwhelmed and lose our ability to be present, and maybe go to really strong reactivity about the fear, anxiety, depression, whatever. Respecting those limits is absolute kindness. We're not machines. Machines you can control, you can adjust here or there. We're not machines. We're living beings with hearts and histories and places of pain, physical and otherwise.

This is why Metta Bhāvanā is so essential. It's so important. "May I be at ease with this anyway." We can't demand of the mind to be present, relaxed, at ease. Sometimes there's vigilance, sometimes there's tightness, sometimes there's fear, sometimes there's really strong reactivity. And of course there's strong reactivity. We don't want pain. We're not masochists. Well, speaking for myself. And I know most people are not, actually. We don't want pain. Who wants pain? So this is where compassion comes in, this pairing of Metta and compassion. "May I be at ease with this anyway." Oh, it's really, really, really unpleasant. Breathing into that kindly. Because there it all is. That's what's happening right now. That's what the universe is giving us in our practice or in our life.

When we can just see the whole struggle without trying to do anything with it, when we can just rest there and, with an eye of wisdom, think, reflect, "What is this? How does it behave?" Getting

to know it as it really is. That's when the struggle ceases. And maybe that pain will kind of dissolve. But please remember, and I know you all know this, at least we all know this in our heads—I'm the same way—the pain may not stop. It might get bigger. The thing is, the suffering on account of that can stop. That's the lesson that the Buddha learned and the essence of his whole teaching. There is unpleasant physical sensation. There are difficult experiences, painful ones. How do we relate to that is where suffering is or isn't.

So just remembering that can be a real kind of lifeline. It's like, "Oh, wait a minute. Yeah. There is this thing that's happening and I really don't like it. Now what?" It's that "now what?" said with a really kind voice. It is our invitation into freedom. Do I want to continue struggling, creating more pain, more distress? Or do I want to be free of reactivity? And I know what the answer for me is. Each of us answers it ourselves in our practice, in our life. And when we come to that place of "now what?" with real kindness and compassion, that's the place where we can actually see the construction of suffering, how it's been constructed, how it's been made. And you might notice I'm not saying how we have made it. No, no, no, no, no. Habit makes it. It's not personal. We have a habit of constructing suffering. And it's not inevitable, it's not something we follow inevitably. It's a choice.

So how to support this choice? Four things come to mind. And they're mentioned in both the texts and the commentaries here and there. The first is wise attention, *Yoni So Manasikāra* in Pāli. This is attending to phenomena in a way that is not personal. So specifically and quite technically, it's attending to phenomena through the lens of the Four Noble Truths. Oh, this is suffering. There's a cause to suffering. There's an end to suffering, and there's a way to the end of suffering. Just remembering that can be helpful. But seeing difficulty as a way in, as opposed to a problem or something we need to do something about, something we need to control, something we need to do a helicopter thing with. Okay. And not taking it as "I", "me", "mine", and noticing all the weaving of storyline around these things. That's wise attention. And I could speak for hours about it, actually. But it's essentially just seeing through the eye of wisdom, without being personal, without making it into more than it actually is. Hardness, softness, warmth, coolness, pressure, tension, simple phenomena. And then what happens to them?

And then a firm resolve. The word is more based in the Pāli word here, is more based in *Adhiṭṭhāna*, determination. But that's too forceful. That's too, I think, too heavy. But just having a steadiness of inclination, always remembering to incline to the wholesome. As you know, the Buddha said, cultivate the wholesome, refrain from the unwholesome, purify the mind. This is the whole of the teachings. That verse from the *Dhammapada*. So having that steadiness, and then there's the wise attention, the steadiness of inclining to the wholesome, and then directing and dedicating ourselves to that. And that's basically remembering. Remembering to do this is the hard part, isn't it? It really is.

It can help first thing in the morning to just repeat to ourselves, in a soft, kind way, our deepest intention. "This is what I want to remember to do today." His Holiness the Dalai Lama dedicates this day to the welfare and benefit of all beings at the very beginning. Each of us will have our own version of that. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and think, "Okay, may I, as often as I can, may I remember to refrain from the unwholesome and always incline to the wholesome?" Just remembering that can be helpful. Because there's so many temptations, and it can feel like willpower that we need, which is force, which is helicopter parenting. You can't do that. You can't have that. You can't. No, no, no. Action comes from joy. We're easily led to think it comes from force. And it's a joy always to know where we're going. Because where we're going is a beautiful place. It's like, "Oh yeah, I want that, and not this. I really do want that. Okay, I can, I can, I can let this go." It makes the letting go so much easier. The letting go of distractions, the greed distractions, the letting go of reactivity, the *dosa* part, the anger, the cynicism, the ill will, the letting go of reactivity, the letting go of zoning out. When we remember, it's like, "Oh, no, actually." Okay, then it becomes choice rather than force.

So remember the beauty of where you're going, and dedicate with wholehearted love your life to that. That can be a place to start in the morning, a seed to plant in the morning. And then, of course, it's the habitual cultivation of all those wholesome mind states. We need to go from being completely deluded to being completely awake, that long, long journey. The path is a long thing. We can't flip a switch. And that actually, in the end, is the greatest letting go. We want so much to just flip a switch and have everything change in a moment. And sometimes it does, but usually not. Usually it's like, "Okay, we remember and forget, and remember and forget, remember and forget." So the habitual cultivation, it's something that becomes very, very interesting as an exploration. What am I cultivating right now? Is it really what it seems to be?

And this is something we can observe through our entire day, not just in the sitting practice. How we relate to the news, how we relate to food, how we relate to each other, how we relate to our stuff, and being really tender with the heart of Metta and compassion with ourselves, but also firmly honest. Because anything can be a source of control if we forget. And it might not be something we think we're controlling, but actually we're becoming control freaks. It might be exercise, it might be food, it might be, you know, reading the news or not reading the news. Notice for yourself where the tightness is coming in the mind, and where you can relax into kindness, and play here.

Because habitual cultivation is this huge field of practice that can look like anything. It's wonderful. This is a field of play, not a field of obligation. How can we incline to the wholesome right now with a light heart, without trying to control it? It can look like breaking the rules that we've set for ourselves. Oh, what the heck? I'm going to do that anyway and see what happens. We might surprise ourselves. So really finding a place to relax into the opening, just as you relax into connecting with the rising and falling in the beginning of the sitting, eventually it'll get there. In the biggest picture, eventually we'll get to freedom if we have that intention. And we keep cultivating that.

You all have a lot, a lot, a lot of practice experience. Trust that. It's not personal. There's some momentum that's been built in sitting practice, in our lives, and it isn't personal. That has its own great momentum. We create the conditions for awakening to arise. Each moment we cultivate wise attention, firmness, remembering. And the more we feed that habit, the easier it gets.

So thank you, everybody, for your practice. It may feel like an awful world out there. In many respects, it is horrific. But you're not doing that. You're doing something else altogether. You're stopping the wars, not creating them. You're putting kindness out into the world. That very, very, very much needs it.

So thank you for your practice, everybody. And thank you for being here this morning. It's really such a joy that we can meet this way. I tend to hate Zoom, but not in these cases. This sort of use of Zoom is so wonderful. To just come together as Dhamma brothers and sisters to practice. Thank you, thank you, thank you.