

LOVING, KNOWING, AND GROWING

A Conversation: Part 2

Tami Simon [00:00:11]

As part of this teaching series, you'll each be offering a deep dive into both practice and teaching on the topic of loving, knowing, and growing, and here's a chance for us to talk together, all three of you, to address different aspects of it. And I want to take a moment to pass this to Tara and Joseph, to see if you have any comments about this model: the three legged-stool model of practice. Any thoughts, observations, insights?

Tara Brach [00:00:47]

Something that's really helpful to me when I kind of just approach the whole landscape of practice, is that the bottom line is that what we're practicing is not to gain something. It's really to come home to what's always already here. The loving and the knowing is who we are. And in a way, practice deconditions the blocks, or deconditions the ways that we don't see it. So one of the possible traps of practice, because I love what Rick describes in the ways that we can turn states into traits. I think that is so powerful. And one of the things that I know I have to be careful about is that I'm trying to make something happen versus a real trust that it's what's already here.

And so just to say a little bit about that, what I've noticed as kind of what helps to hold

the practices is that it really comes out of love for truth, love for love. When the sincerity is really pure, then there's not a grasping around trying to train ourselves into something. There's more of a kind of celebrating what's already here.

And one of the things I notice over time with myself and with others and this is a image that Joseph, I think I got it from you maybe 32 years ago, but I'm not sure. But that at first practice has a quality of much more deliberate effort where we're really feeling something that's pleasurable, as Rick said, and we're pausing, we're savoring it and we're feeling in our bodies and really cultivating something. And the moments of non-grasping we really pay attention to. OK. Look at the difference. And so on. And then what happens over time is that we're deconditioning the blocks so that it's more and more available - that loving and knowing.

And so rather than climbing a hill and making a deliberate effort that really has any strain at all to it. It's almost inverted so that more and more there's a remembering and a coming back to that present, that openness, that non-clinging and that tenderness, that really is our nature. So I just wanted to mention that as a way to hold the very practices that we're all going to be exploring on how to wake up these interdependent wings of knowing and loving.

Joseph Goldstein [00:03:25]

I have just a couple of comments that came to mind as Rick and Tara were speaking recently. I was visiting Barcelona and I went to that famous Gaudi cathedral there, which is quite extraordinary. And there was a bit of a museum with just some history of his process. And there was one line that he had on the wall of the museum, which I copied down because it felt so applicable to the meditative process and just this very discussion that we're having now: He said, "To do things right, first you'd need love, then technique." And I thought that's so true in the practice because very often people can get caught in a technique, you know, and then with all kinds of judgment about, "am I doing the technique right or not right? Am I able to do it?" But if we come to the practice - just as Tara said - we come with that feeling of love for the Dharma, love for the truth, love for the practice, then the techniques - and there are many techniques which can support each other - they're all supported for that love.

And so you could then see the techniques of mindfulness as being the cause or condition to strengthen that feeling of love we have for what's true. So that's one aspect - I really appreciated Gaudi's hierarchy of love and technique.

Obviously, the awareness of the body is just so crucial and it's the first foundation of mindfulness. And the Buddha was very explicit about the value of it. He said mindfulness of the body leads to nirvana. So in terms of the direct path to awakening, mindfulness of the body will serve that. And in all the ways of getting us in touch with what we're actually feeling.

But I wouldn't want to posit that as a contradistinction to awareness of the mind. And I think Rick said, you know, the body full of mind, but it's also the mind full of body. How are we experiencing the body except through the mind? And what I found is that both at different times in our own evolution of practice and also for different people in different personalities, some people will either be drawn to or benefit greatly from an emphasis on the body because there's so much to learn from it. But at other times in our practice or for other kinds of temperaments, it may be that emphasis on what's happening in the mind is an easier doorway.

And so, for example, just basically what I mentioned before in terms of being aware, being lost in thought and aware of the thought. So that's not so much with reference to the body, that's with reference to what's happening in our minds, and that can be as liberating and as illuminating as what we'd learned from being in the body. I think there's an equality there, not a hierarchy, of what is worth paying attention to with regard to the three legs.

Somebody once asked one of our teachers, Dipa Ma, who was this extraordinary woman of unbelievable attainment and realization. And somebody once asked her, "Well, now at this stage, what? What's in your mind?" And she said, "concentration, love and peace."

That was the nature of her mind after, you know, the depth of her practice came to fruition. So somebody once asked her, "you know, should I practice insight, should I practice metta?" And they were confused and they were having a lot of doubt going back and forth. And she said that for her, the two are not so different. And she said, "when you're practicing lovingkindness, aren't you also being mindful? And when you're mindful, aren't you also loving?" And I thought that understanding that they are inextricably combined when we come to a mature understanding of them, they are really part of the same thing. And that's just really beautiful. You know, it feels like a real integration of our being on all of these different angles.

Tami Simon [00:08:23]

Thank you, Joseph. I wanted to ask all three of you a question about practice, because I'm pretty sure this is accurate, that all three of you have done a lot of retreat practice, whether that's a month-long retreat or longer - months and months, weeks and weeks. And I think many people in our contemporary society aren't drawn to long retreat practice, especially people I meet now who are in their 20s, or in their 30s. You know, I've heard people say to me, "you know, Tami, that's of a different generation. You guys are taking yourselves out to these retreat centers. And, you know, I want to learn in the midst of my life. I want to practice in the midst of my life. I want to have my iPhone teachings right there and available to me. Maybe I'll go to something on a Wednesday night during the week in my urban setting. But that's it. That's all I want to do. You know, we're in a different time. Time to evolve the practice and the way it's taught." And I'm curious what you think about that. Is there something missing if people don't do intensive retreat practice?

Joseph Goldstein [00:09:32]

Yes. You know, the Buddha made one very striking statement, which challenges all of us, where he said there's no wisdom without concentration. And that's a very direct statement about the nature of the UNconcentrated mind. You know, when we just lost in the moment to

moment interactions of our lives and the business and the distractions of our lives, generally, the mind is a bit more restless and a bit more distracted. And it's very hard to have a sustained awareness on a deep level of what's going on in the mind and body, without a foundation of some level of concentration. And it doesn't mean that, you know, we have to develop some superpower of concentration. It's not that. But there has to be a modicum of concentration in order to develop insight.

And I experienced this very directly in my own practice. When I started, I had zero concentration. I studied philosophy in college. I loved to think about things, went off to India, started practicing. I still love to think about things. So I would sit and think. And it was very enjoyable. The hour went quickly. But I wasn't learning much with regard to what meditation could teach. And it took time and it took some sustained effort to train the mind to at least some level of concentration. And one of the ways that that happened, which was very effective for me, was doing lovingkindness, meditation, focusing on the method. The lovingkindness is a very effective way, not only of developing love, but of developing concentration. And so when I hear people suggest that, "oh, I just want to make my life my practice and not do some of the foundational work"... maybe for some few people, that would work, but I think for most people we really need to take periods of training to develop foundational skills that we can then bring to the world and then our interaction in the world actually becomes possible to deepen our understanding through it.

You know, when people say, "well, I'm going to make my life my practice and I'm going to just integrate my practice into my life," we have to have something to integrate into it. We have to have developed certain skills of concentration, of mindfulness, of lovingkindness. So a musician practices the scales or an athlete practices certain techniques of the particular sport in order to then be able to live it and play music or do the sport in an easeful, effortless way. So I just feel that it is important to realize that some practice is needed. Otherwise, we generally just play out the habit patterns of our conditioning, which can be very strong. So it takes some power, it takes some strength to be able to step back from those deeply established habit patterns of the mind. And here's where formal practice comes in. It doesn't have to be three months, but it has to be something in my understanding.

Tara Brach [00:13:19]

I can speak from my own experience, and one of the things that struck me about the question, Tami, you know, when people say, kind of a little bit like the certainty of this is like that generation, we can do it this way. The Buddha had this phrase: come see for yourself. And it

really is an experiment to see what works, and everyone I know, pretty much everyone that comes to retreat - unless they've been in a lot of trauma and they didn't really have the right support at the retreat - it's amazing to me the changes that people experience in a week-long retreat, let's say, and a lot of it is just the law of physics: we can't settle enough to even recognize we're lost in the stream of thought often. And when there is a little more concentration and settling, we actually can recognize that we're not our thoughts.

I mean, people come out of retreats and say, "I realize I don't have to believe my thoughts." And there is such liberation in that. And I can say for myself that some of the biggest unfoldings in my life came out of the depth of realization from a retreat, and then were integrated over time in that daily practice. But I've cherished the times of having that refuge. And over the decades, I've watched a lot of people, kind of how they are on the path - and a lot of people plateauing, a lot of people getting stuck, and those that keep on growing, that the common denominator really is this quality of sincerity. Joseph mentioned too, this love for the dharma, and that leads us to keep on exploring, "well, what really frees me?" And so my response to somebody if they said, "do we really need retreats?" is to find out what happens on a retreat. Because there's a touching into something beyond our normal conditioning that we cherish that then keeps us going.

Rick Hanson [00:15:30]

I've gotten a lot out of retreats, including retreats taught by Joseph and Tara for sure.

I also think that people, including myself, get a lot out of certain kinds of other experiences that are not available to have on retreat. For example, I've gotten a lot out of wilderness activities. I've gotten a lot out of arguing with my partner and coming to some resolution that I actually learned from. And I tend to be fairly pragmatic about this and recognize that people have different aims. I mean, people coming to this program about practice will have different aims.

And for me, it's important to appreciate that practice is a universal value. It's universal, it's what we call our children to do when they're in grade school or high school. It's what we have to do ourselves when we're dealing with, let's say, the care of an aging parent. We find formalizations so practice in different traditions - Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, indigenous first-people traditions, and in secular traditions. So I want to be crystal clear that practice, as you know, Buddhism has no monopoly on practice. I think it has some wonderful insights to offer to practice, including identifying certain really important factors of well-being and at the upper reaches of human potential that are really important, such as what Joseph said about concentration and the

development of that stability and penetrating clarity of concentration. That's something we develop. And to something that Tara said earlier I want to speak to, I think that classically development is understood in two ways: as both the acquisition of certain qualities, greater virtue, greater concentration, greater wisdom, as well as the uncovering of the radiant true nature, the natural goodness, the wakefulness that was always already there. Both are true, and both involve a process of change over time that within ordinary reality must involve lasting changes in the body-mind.

And so to me, it's humbling, really, to appreciate that in many formal interventions - such as mindfulness based stress reduction - that are well-studied, or psychotherapy - my world - or perhaps even studies on formal retreat practice, probably about a third to half of the people who go through them may well have what they would consider to be enjoyable, wonderful experiences with no lasting change, no evidence of any kind of lasting change, including in their own self-report. So for me, given that we're engaged in processes of development, why not be skillful and helpful along the way? And one of the ways to do that is to put yourself in situations that are going to kick your butt. And for me, as I came on from my first retreat, I remember saying to my kids there were maybe 10 or 7, "Nothing is as powerful as nothing."

I mean, just a certain kind of a retreat, basically walking, sitting, walking, sitting, walking, sitting mainly in silence, walking, sitting, walking, sitting - a lot of nothing. Which means that all the crazy something of my own mind is so apparent.

So I think those are major things you can do for yourself to help yourself. And I think there are different forms of retreat that are less formal, including in everyday life. We all need a minute a day of retreat minimally. Now, whether it's in the shower or on the toilet or with that cup of tea, we all need that opportunity to step back from the madness and calm down and help the body-mind, that sweet, soft animal of the body, as Mary Oliver put it. Settle down at least a minute a day.

That's one reason why I think some kind of meditation - whatever sort suit you - every day is so important to just reset a little bit. And absolutely, if you can find that time - and privilege is a factor here, although not always because most retreat centers have scholarships, I know... certainly IMS does, Spirit Rock does, who and I'm involved with - find a time if you possibly can, at least a week a year to step off the wheel and give yourself that really, really precious gift. That's definitely been true for me.

Tami Simon [00:20:00]

Now, you know, I ask this question kind of going to the extreme of long retreats, because I know that all three of you have done a lot of retreat practice. And here you're offering in some ways the essence of these three different aspects of practice in an online series. So one question is, while your training all came from this deep retreat, do people listening need that? And I think what I heard was, "give it a go", at least, and see. I mean, at minimum - and even stronger from Joseph's point of view, that it could be actually a requirement - for most people to hit the depths.

But I think the real questions that someone coming to a series like this is perhaps asking about practice is, "how do I know how to structure my life with the right approach to practice? There's so much information, there are so many books, there's so much material online, there's so much coming at me. There's so much that is on the surface and seems kind of shallow. OK. We talked about this deep end approach, which I may or may not be able to fit into my life right now. How do I approach practice so that I can be on an evolutionary path? What's the recommendation from these three good physicians of the Dharma?"

Rick Hanson [00:21:28]

Maybe I'll just start in a really brief way. I think the most important practice is like the most important exercise: It's the one you'll actually do.

So, as I think both Joseph and Tara has said, practice needs to feel good in some ways. There needs to be a heartfelt quality to it, so look for ways that it's enjoyable and look for ways that it feels like it's juicy, it's not just dry, that it's actually juicy and you feel like you're getting somewhere with it, that it's actually beneficial for you.

That's one thing. Second, I think it's just helpful to use this program to ask yourself as you move through your day, how warmhearted are you being with yourself and with the world, including the ways in which - this is a really important point, it was implicit in what Tara said - we practice for others as well as ourselves. We practice to be helpful to them. We practice to cultivate qualities in ourselves that will be helpful to them and less harmful to them over time. And it's really useful in practice to feel like others are with you in your heart, as you deal with wrong - in my mind, at least - your own neurotic tendencies. So the question would be, as you move through your day - and I'll finish on this - that you ask yourself, "huh? Is there that warmheartedness? Is my heart warm? Is there - in the word of the Buddha - an ardent quality to my practice? Also, am I being mindful and my observing my reactions rather than being swept away by them or

identified with them? Is there an acceptance? Is there an openness to my own interior?" And also ask yourself, "are you helping yourself grow along the way? What are you developing these days?" Not with the pitfall that Tara highlighted of getting caught up and striving and straining and comparing. But more like in a kind way, much as you would for others. How are you helping yourself tomorrow be a little less reactive to that such-and-such situation and a little more peaceful, a little more concentrated, and a little more rested in love as Dipa Ma developed herself over time. So that would be one thing I would just suggest - this awareness of these three attributes, these three aspects of practice and just kind of have some self-awareness about them as you go through your day.

Tara Brach [00:23:55]

I would add, I am right there with you, Rick, that we can't do it alone.

I mean, the depth of awakening is realizing it's not a self-awakening. We kind of awaken to our shared belonging. Mother Teresa said if we're suffering, it's because we've forgotten our belonging. So a real encouragement to practice with others, really to join together with others. So often, I'll be leading a day long and I'll have people share. I have a little practice where we'll write down our fears and put them in a pile and mix them up. And then people in a small circle will just read out each other's fears. And there comes this realization that it's not my fear, it's that fear which creates so we're not so identified. There's more space as more capacity to be with what comes. There's such power in our collective. Of just growing together. So that's one thing is to practice with others.

And practice isn't just the formal sitting practice. Also, as much as I feel we need long retreats and when I say long, we need some days so we can quiet enough to see what's true. I feel like we need to have a very deliberate and real practice with each other, that we on purpose are bringing our capacity to see vulnerability and care about another, alive with each other, that we're seeing each other's goodness and letting each other know. And that's as much of a practice or relational practice that frees us as anything else. So I just want to add in the relational peace, since I'm the love person, that that be a central part of whatever we've designed for ourselves.

Joseph Goldstein [00:25:50]

I think there's one frame from the Buddhist teachings which encompasses a lot of what we've been talking about - that Rick has mentioned, and Tara - which takes us out of the idea that when we use the term practice, we're necessarily only referring to some kind of formal

meditation practice and the Buddhist frame would be the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is the path of practicing what the Buddha said. It's this whole part, each of the eight steps which lead onward to awakening.

But only three of those eight really have to do with formal meditation practice, right? Effort and concentration and mindfulness. There are other aspects which are so powerful. If we integrate them in our understanding of what practice means. For example, one that has been tremendously fruitful to me is right speech. This is one of the steps on the Eightfold Path. So it's not a secondary aspect of this whole endeavor. We speak a lot - well, except when we're on retreat - we basically communicate largely through our speech. But how often are we really paying attention to the motive behind our speech before we say anything?

I mean, my experience - and I think it's quite common - is that we find the words just kind of pouring out spontaneously. It may be somewhat rare. To be mindful enough before we start speaking of what we're about to say and the motive behind it. So one of the guidelines the Buddha gave with regard to right speech - which is so simple and I love it because it goes to the heart of the love aspect of this whole path - And that is, he said, just pay attention to whether your speech is dividing people or bringing them together.

And it's very interesting, even when we just bring it right down to our ordinary, everyday lives and conversations. This is like a little sidebar: I was in the Peace Corps after college, which is where I got interested in Buddhism. I was in Thailand and just learning a little bit about the Eightfold Path and the teachings. So I read about right speech. And I made an experiment. I was going to go for a few months without talking about any third person. I wasn't going to speak to someone about someone else. It was amazing. There was like 90 percent of my speech. And before that, I would not have even known that, you know, just how much of the time we are speaking about other people. And it's not suggesting that that's necessarily always a bad thing to do. It's not. But then bringing this guideline into play, as I do that, is it pushing people apart? Is creating divisiveness or is it helping to unify people? So that's bringing mindfulness right into a predominant daily activity.

And that's as important and it's as much mindfulness as when we're sitting on the cushion. So I would suggest for people who are interested in this program and exploring possibilities of understanding their life as practice, maybe to do a little reading on the Eightfold Path and to really explore, take time with each one of the steps and apply each one as an experiment, "OK, how do I practice right view, or right intention, or right speech or right livelihood?" All of these aspects are how we're living our lives.