

FROM THE DESK OF PIERRE ZIMMERMAN: Working with our Mind – 12/1/23

In many meditation traditions there are essentially many ways to cultivate awareness and compassion, qualities that are innate in human beings because the seed of consciousness is thought to be in the heart.

When we speak of the mind, we consider an awakened mind to also be an awakened heart. The problem is that we don't recognize the obstacles that obscure and cover both. The sun is a great metaphor for this awakened, open energy that always exists. Even when we cannot see it, like the sun, it is still up there and produces warmth.

How often do we appreciate what we have right in the moment? The trick of the mind is to continuously expect a sense of fulfillment in the future, dreading or anticipating some upcoming experience, or remembering nostalgic moments from the past. So, whenever we say, *being in the now*, as soon as we've made that statement, it has already passed. By its very nature it is ungraspable.

We must find our mind, which is just a continuous flow of discursive thoughts with no periods, comas, paragraphs or page numbers. It works all day, every day, leading the charge and governing most of our activities and is therefore considered supreme.

The mind and body have a good relationship for the most part and must be on good terms to experience wellbeing. When we are aware, we are awakening from an active daydream where the mind is mostly acting like a movie trailer or salivating continuous thoughts. The problem is that we really want the constant adrenaline rush. It is the drug of choice in our society.

The five sense perceptions are considered sacred because they only operate in the present, unlike the conceptual mind that has the overarching need to create narratives about experiences and of course judge them. It is only when we touch into the present that we drop into the ground of being.

During meditation we see how the adrenaline and grasping reveals itself as the root of suffering because it really is the same principle as in any addiction, the urge and craving to continuously fuel our entertainment mind.

PZ/12/1/23

FROM THE DESK OF PIERRE ZIMMERMAN: Compassion – 11/1/23

The Dalai Lama defines compassion as “a state of mind that is nonviolent, non-harming and non-aggressive. It is a mental attitude based on the wish for others to be free of their suffering and is associated with a sense of commitment, responsibility and respect towards others.” We experience this innate heartfelt caring for others as if it were our own suffering. Suffering is one of the most basic elements that we share with other sentient beings, the factor that unifies us all with all living creatures, and we understand there is a lot of it in the world, on so many levels.

How can we relieve suffering in others and ourselves?

Let’s look at the three levels of compassion:

- For those experiencing suffering and pain
- For those fixed on mundane concerns in their pursuit of happiness
- For those grasping onto a false or deluded sense of self.

The notion of suffering brings unity underlying all beings. This is a theme that runs through all the great spiritual traditions. We are One United Body!

The second level of compassion arises for those who are leading their lives in ways that cannot possibly result in genuine happiness through selfish, devious and heartless acts to gain success, respect, power etc.... usually at any cost.

The third level is about beings grasping on a deluded sense of “I” and “mine,” seeking happiness as something dependent on others or external objects, ultimately never being satisfied because they never last forever.

We fail to view others with compassion because our own minds come under the influence of mental afflictions such as fear, greed, craving, hostility, delusion, ignorance, and/or jealousy among others. When we have resonance of others suffering, we can experience compassion with courage. Empathy alone is not sufficient! Compassion doesn’t mean we feel sorry for others, and it is not having pity for them. It is about adopting a state of wisdom in simply knowing that whenever someone suffers, it ultimately affects our own heart and mind.

Come deeply to rest in your awareness and wish for all beings to be free from suffering and the sources of suffering. May whatever benefits being created be dedicated to the fulfillment of our most meaningful aspirations for ourselves and those around us to be free and cultivate loving kindness and compassion as often as possible.

PZ/11/1/23

FROM THE DESK OF PIERRE ZIMMERMAN: The Many Possibilities to Create and Influence Change - 10/1/23

Albert Einstein said, "The world is a dangerous place to live; not because people are evil but because of the people who don't do anything about it." There are many problems in the world that might seem insurmountable or benign. We often are not able to resolve them immediately. How can we be engaged and do something about impasses, stickiness and stubbornness?

Maybe we can explore long range, mid-range and close possibilities, using inquiry about how to transform conflicts and let go of our fixed mental models. We can reflect and ask ourselves questions to end undesirable situations.

The following leverage points can assist us in creating change:

Personal change — How are we going to be and act in a conflict?

What ground rules do we need to set as guideposts to care for each other?

Do we understand inter-being?

Relational change — Change brings conflict and always challenges the status of our relationships. There might be distance, avoidance at first, or unwise ways of communicating important needs and wishes. Who has leverage and how is power expressed? Can we move beyond stalemates?

Structural change — Conflict always challenges structures and contexts. Where can we find a way to influence and transform complex systems? Is there a sound foundation to support the change? Will the change create more suffering?

Cultural change — Conflict and problems are embedded in how people make sense of the world from their perspectives as a tribe, viewpoints of the elders or decision makers. What generational patterns of suffering have been about race, sexism, gender and economical differences? Do we care, and how do we demonstrate it?

Ordinary people who tend to make change happen to have a deep intuitive sense about the web of relationships they live in. They are curious and can hold more than one vision at a time, going beyond right and wrong, looking instead at what is unwholesome for the greater collective good. With a fresh imagination we can see the long-term change and short-term responses. These provide creativity, new stories and myths, and a broader view, bringing great qualities into existence.

The basic principle in making bread requires the largest ingredient, flour, and the smallest one, which is yeast. With a little bit of honey and darkness, the yeast replicates and sustains itself. This illustrates how we need both large and small elements for positive outcomes.

PZ/10/1/23

FROM THE DESK OF PIERRE ZIMMERMAN: The Four Foundations of Mindfulness - 9/1/23

The four foundations of mindfulness are the path to overcoming suffering with objective domains that comprise the field of human experience: the body, feelings, mind states and investigation of phenomena of the mind that is clear, cognizant and balanced. The practice involves the coming together of energy and discernment, detached from the claims of the mundane world.

Of the four applications of mindfulness, the contemplation of the body is concerned with the material side of existence, feelings and mind states with the emotional and mental side and the last one with the exploration of experience in ways reflecting the goal of the teachings.

Contemplation of the body includes mindfulness of breathing, the natural process of respiration under the lens of observation, pulling us back from mental meandering towards anchoring the mind securely in the present, letting bodily functions gradually quiet down. We also pay attention to postures: walking, standing, sitting and lying down and the impersonal nature of the body with the five elements to experience embodiment.

Contemplation of feelings refers to the tone of experience, whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Pleasant ones tend to feed on greed and attachment, painful ones provoke aversion and neutral ones sustain delusion, manifesting as ignorance, apathy and complacency. Focused attention shifts from the feelings to the process of feeling, which reveals itself to be a ceaseless flux arising and dissolving, reminding us of constant states of impermanence.

Contemplation of the mind means observing mind states, concentrated and un-concentrated ones, scattered or focused, developed and undeveloped and so on. It allows us to know that they are merely mind states, not identified as 'I' or 'Mine.' The seemingly solid, stable mind reveals itself to be a stream of mental acts and movements, coming from awareness and returning to it.

Contemplation of phenomena means that there are hindrances such as ill will, dullness, drowsiness, restlessness, worry and doubt. We note them and discern how they rise, how they dissipate and how they can be prevented. A stable mind gives rise to investigation and calls forth tranquility of concentration in order to experience equanimity (impartiality).

These four foundations lead towards purification, the ending of ignorance, craving, hatred, sorrow and grief, with the realization of a path that allows us to uproot defilements, supports us in being more authentic, and brings the extinction of suffering gradually, over time, with practice. Remember, what we practice grows!

PZ/9/1/23

FROM THE DESK OF PIERRE ZIMMERMAN: Emotional Imbalance – 8/1/23

Mental balance is understood to be comprised of four elements: attentional, conative, cognitive and emotional balance. Our mind is vulnerable to anger, anxiety, depression, loneliness, despair and other symptoms. This might be due to social conditioning and environmental factors but can be remedied through skillful means and continuous mental training.

Rather than cover up our imbalances, we can eliminate our lack of contentment by cultivating these four areas and achieve a decent state of sanity. What frees the mind deeply is letting go of afflictive tendencies and cultivating wholesome attitudes and perspectives, intentions and behaviors. There are three kinds of imbalances: deficit, hyperactivity and dysfunction.

An emotional deficit has the flavor of exhibiting cold indifference towards others and the world at large, providing emotional deadness.

Emotional hyperactivity shows excessive and obsessive states of elation or depression, hope and fear, adulation or contempt for someone, craving or hostility.

Emotional dysfunction occurs when our emotional impulses and responses are inappropriate to any presenting circumstances or experiences. For instance, one might delight in someone's misfortunes and behave in a manner that is uncalled for.

Our meditative practices of the four immeasurables: lovingkindness for oneself, empathy and compassion for others, equanimity in the face of any experience we encounter and empathetic joy for other's wellbeing — are wholesome qualities to counter defilements. These are craving, delusion, hostility, despair or indifference.

Our minds are not structurally unbalanced, only habitually because of poor coping skills or unskillful means. Balance results from a state of wellbeing that is not contingent upon sensory, intellectual, aesthetic or behavioral stimuli but depends on our relationship to all stimuli. Welcoming the reality of “What is” over and over will bring genuine happiness and spiritual maturity.

PZ/8/1/23

FROM THE DESK OF PIERRE ZIMMERMAN: Intimacy – 7/1/23

In its simplest definition intimacy means close familiarity and friendship. Breathing is intimate and is so much more than just getting air into our bodies, a connection to our surroundings. Our bodies are our nearest environment.

Words have power and meaning beyond definition and often evoke different feelings to different people. Intimacy is about connection and safety, for some strictly sentimental or related to sexual activities.

In the context I am addressing today, it is related to compassion, calm mind/heart states and joyful actions. It is about autonomy and connection, a sense of interdependence, and relates to wellbeing with added insight and awareness.

Think for a moment about the most healthy, rewarding intimate relationships you have known, in your short or long life. For some of you it might reflect painful recollections, for some, the list of wonderful relationships is extensive. No matter where you fall on the spectrum, you can use what you know and feel about intimacy to deepen your ability to connect on a profound level to others and the world around you.

We are not separate from the rest of the universe, even though we might feel that way at times. Dharma teachings have long focused on helping us to let go of the habit of feeling separate from everything and instead realize that we are part of a vast ever unfolding whole. Letting go of the habit of alienation brings a sense of oceanic peace and wellbeing, stimulating compassionate actions for oneself and others.

The practice of cultivation of intimacy is not ultimately about eliminating or getting rid of this sense that we are apart from the world. It is really about harmonizing autonomy and interdependence and get our sense of separateness in balance with our sense of connection, embodying one undivided whole, developing both healthy boundaries and open awareness with kind intentions.

Enlightenment is intimacy with the ten thousand things. – Dogan

PZ/7/1/23

FROM THE DESK OF PIERRE ZIMMERMAN: Taking Refuge – 6/1/23

How do we relate to constant change? Do we surrender, do we resist? Do we go along with relaxed groundlessness? If everything changes all the time, what is really true, what can we hold on to? What type of refuge is available?

These questions lead us to contemplate ways to find inner stability amid transitions and impermanence and belong to a community of people committed to investigating the path leading to compassion and loving kindness for oneself and any other sentient being.

Often, we take refuge to avoid the unavoidable. It typically manifests in three ways.

1) What are we chasing after?

What are we grasping at?

Is it permanence?

Do we want what we want when we want it?

2) Running away.

Do we leave the body, numb ourselves, avoid insecurity?

Maybe we fear falling short and avoid insecurity with many distractions.

3) Or we fight.

We do that by using blame displacement to protect ourselves, attempting to control whatever situation we must face, or espouse overdoing or busyness.

We need to see the light of consciousness, what we call luminous love, to discover what is happening inside and take a deep dive into the ground of being, the foundation of our psyche and awareness. We practice meditation, not to emphasize philosophizing, because the foundation of contemplative endeavors is not conceptual, it is meant to take us into a deeper experience, a spiritual instinct. It is a guide to dive into experience, not just think about or interpret it. We lean into the fragility of life with the support of taking refuge in that which resources us to be alive and thriving.

PZ/6/1/23

FROM THE DESK OF PIERRE ZIMMERMAN: Contraction to Expansion 5/1/23

To move from fragmentation toward spaciousness we need to become more embodied, to feel the rhythm of the breath, and to focus on the parasympathetic component of the central nervous system.

The body and mind are on good terms unless we are emotionally activated and dysregulated, and that is when we need to check out our physiology. Often, core beliefs and disparaging mantras such as “I am not enough” or “I am a failure” block physical energy and the emotional body.

Expansion feels scary, sometimes. We wonder, who is the “I” that has doubts, that is conflicted about self-inquiry and prefers being on guard? Are we grieving about change? Are we interested in moving from habitual drifting in order to shift our view and become motivated to not distance ourselves from others?

We prefer to resist even though we know discomfort will persist...

Being with the pain of suffering is necessary, rather than seeing it as a moral injury, feeling helpless to make a difference, maybe even experiencing vicarious trauma.

Spring invites us to plant new seeds in our gardens and our daily lives. Being at ease and having compassion for ourselves, we can open up and be present to what and who is calling on us. Everything changes in order to remind us that movement and stillness are one, bringing homeostasis in our bodies, nurturance in our mind and heart.

Resurrection, restoration, reflection, re-evaluation and renewal support us to move toward harmony with kind intentions and awe, so we can claim with conviction that our lives are so very precious.

PZ/5/1/23

FROM THE DESK OF PIERRE ZIMMERMAN: Patience – 4/1/23

Most of us have some amount of patience and are able to bear a variety of difficult circumstances, but not all of the time. We tend to be patient with the weather, infants, certain people we love who maybe do not live with us, those we are trying to please or impress, those we find attractive, or people with weaknesses.

There are lots of small irritations in our lives, and comfort is sometimes hard to come by. How do we work with the challenges that come our way, which can seem insurmountable in given moments? How do we extend our patience to situations or people that provoke anger, boredom, superiority, or annoyance?

Developing patience depends to a great extent on our self-confidence and self-image, because we are not necessarily born with it. If we see ourselves as nervous, shaky, or irritable, we tend to follow that image. Changing our attitude, seeing ourselves as tolerant and not easily disturbed, we are able to respond better to challenges and set in motion more favorable ways for things to unfold.

Calling on awareness, we can catch ourselves before we go down the road of lost composure, and see circumstances as neutral. Rather than react, we can meet whatever triggers us and let go of all kinds of old conditioning and habitual patterns.

Judgment, avoidance and unreasonable expectations often get in the way of being present to whatever situation arises. It is not what shows up in our life and mind as much as how we work with what surfaces outside of us and within us that matters. We have to be willing to go into the unknown, which requires a leap of faith, and see the irritations and tests that come up in our lives as wonderful opportunities to train our minds and hearts.

Humor is a great antidote, allowing us to see situations as being manageable. When we have insight into our short fuses, the incredible little and big ironies of life diminish and possibly dissipate.

People we meet wear different clothes, different size shoes and egos. It is theirs to wear; we don't have to imitate them or take on their personalities, histories or stories. Then our righteous indignation with life tends to diminish, and whatever shows up becomes much more tolerable. Patience is one of the important skillful means for occupying the lightness of our being.

PZ/4/1/23

FROM THE DESK OF PIERRE ZIMMERMAN: Awe – 3/1/23

When was the last time you experienced awe?

The entry into the realm of spirit can take place when we are in awe.

What happens in the body reflects what is happening in the mind and spirit. People can get well when they undergo a transformation of lifestyle, emotions and spirit, and instead of drifting are shifting in body/mind. We need to celebrate and support people who experience any dis-ease, not just because they show us that our society is out of balance, but to participate in their healing, because we are all responsible to contribute to other's manifold levels of health, in small or large measures.

Longing for spirit manifests in many ways: our desire to belong, our drive to know our purpose in life, to share gifts we have been holding onto, the urge to escape the limitations of our conditioned self-centered personality, and a taste for experiences that transcend the day to day grind.

Oneness with nature is a must for healing, understanding that there are relationships above ground and below, knowing that we have a commitment to help Mother Nature to thrive, because of her gifts.

When our inner voice speaks to us, inflammation and stress hormones levels are reduced, encouraging the development of healthier brain circuitry and better epigenetic functioning. We observe ourselves with our mind and heart, cultivate compassionate curiosity and equanimity, instead of judgment. Awe brings relief and contentment!

As A.H. Almaas has stated: "Ultimately your greatest gift to the world is being who you are - both your gift and your fulfillment."

PZ/3/1/23

FROM THE DESK OF PIERRE ZIMMERMAN: The Purpose of Intentions – 2/1/23

One beautiful way to honor the turning of the seasons and bring more light in the dark time of the year is to set intentions for the new year. It is not about setting resolutions; they usually don't last long. It may be as simple as, "I vow to be more kind this year." Or, "I will be aware of nature more often and honor the earth." Setting your own short or long term intentions has the power to guide you, day to day, or in moment to moment living.

The causes and outcomes of every action stem from the heart's intentions. They can lead us to unconsciously act out, due to habit and fear, or can spring from deliberate thoughtfulness and care. Often in meditation practice we start with setting an intention, a kind of check-in where we connect with our deepest aspirations, so that they may inform our intentions and motivations.

Intention is the articulation of a conscious goal that inclines us in the directions we truly mean to go. We need motivation to keep up the drive to act, which is the spark behind any intention. Our intention sets the tone for the day.

We can contemplate the following questions:

"What is it that I value deeply? What in the depth of my heart, do I wish for myself, my loved ones, and for the world?"

Work on the questions themselves, even if you don't have ready answers. Questions like: "Can I avoid hurting others deliberately? Can I use my day in a way that is in tune with my deeper values? Can I relate to myself, others and events around me with more kindness and less judgment?"

Most of us will find that we often fall short and we are able to notice the gaps between our behavior, aspirations and our actual life. It's important not to beat ourselves up with self-criticism. This awareness will help us be more attentive the next day, opening opportunities to bring our everyday thoughts and actions into closer alignment with our goals, practicing compassion and self-compassion. The Tibetan word for compassion means the "king of heart," the highest spiritual ideal and the highest expression of our humanity.

May all beings attain happiness and its causes

May all being be free from suffering and its causes

May all beings never be separated from joy that is free of misery

May all beings abide in equanimity, free from bias, attachment and aversion

PZ/2/1/23

FROM THE DESK OF PIERRE ZIMMERMAN: Many Doorways - 1/1/23

We will explore the intersection of psychology and spirituality, looking at each one and how they complement each other.

Psychological work is a process of unfolding, of opening up to our experiences and finding out what is there, hidden or implicit. It is sort of like unpacking a suitcase that was packed a long time ago, and we have forgotten what we stuffed into it. Through a process of inquiry, we discover a gradual unfolding, in steps.

Meditation practice involves cutting through the stuff of the mind, moving into deeper stages of presence in each moment to explore or understand particular experiences. The practice is not so much to unpack or resolve issues, but drop many concepts and freshly meet this moment and the next, making direct contact with our essential being. We surrender to something larger than ourselves, pure non-conceptual presence and timeless awareness, we discover sudden openings and dimensions of spaciousness, allowing us to accept and embrace who we are.

Nothing is lasting, each moment ends, a new one arises, and the only thing that persists is the story in our mind that we are creating. It's the mind that maintains the sense of continuity, believing that who we are today is the same self we were yesterday. Impermanence breaks down the illusion of a movie that keeps unrolling. In truth this movie is made up of sequences of separate frames, just as consciousness isn't anything solid, continuous or enduring.

Waking up means that we notice the vibrancy and openness of each moment. The energy and pulse of life moves in waves with continuous ups and downs, expansion and contraction, ebb and flow. Spiritual practice is to learn to ride each wave and be at one with it. Very little in our lives fits our image of it, while being in the moment doesn't include any should's or could's.

Open presence with others tends to be difficult because we suffer from interpersonal wounding, feeling a deep sense of not being lovable or worthy, not able to love ourselves. This cuts us off from our deeper and essential nature. Letting go of a generalized sense of grievance against "the other," the need to create an adversary that we carry around inside, allows us to drop the sense of deficiency and the "holes" inside.

This letting go can open the doorway through which we gain access to our deeper nature, the true source of love, wholeness and presence. This source is trustworthy because it doesn't disappear and means we can be present in relationships, while also abiding in our own nature.

PZ/1/1/23