

Dharma Talk February 18, 2025
Welcome Everything

Our theme for 2025 is Welcome Everything. And the line that comes after “Welcome everything” is “push nothing away.” This is the crux of this teaching: that our suffering comes from resistance. Resisting what is happening, wanting things to be different. Fighting with reality.

I’m not sure how, as humans, we have gotten to the point where we believe we can control reality, where we can create a life that has in it everything we want and nothing we don’t want. Which means, only pleasure, no pain. As students of the Buddha, we know that this is a superficial way to see life, it’s unsatisfactory and limited. And we are bound to be unsuccessful at it.

The Buddha said that if one mote of dust were removed from the universe, the entire thing would collapse. Absolutely everything is essential. Do I believe this? This is a good question to ask yourself as you hear distressing news. The poet Rumi says, “Do not feel lonely. The entire universe is inside you.” When we rest in the reality of interbeing, we know this truth, and then everything has a place, everything belongs.

When I was asked to announce our theme of practice for this year, I had many thoughts on my back burner, but they hadn’t coalesced into anything specific. So I just asked the Buddha to tell me, and what came out – Welcome Everything – was a surprise to me. So this year we will explore together what the Buddha wants to teach us.

A couple of weeks after we published the theme, an old story came to me, of something that happened to me around 25 years ago. I was living in Ashland and working with a business partner that had moved from Ashland to Las Vegas, providing sales and marketing support to manufacturers in the natural products industry. Twice a year we would attend trade shows to see our clients and try to get new ones. Every year one show was in Anaheim, California, so I flew to Las Vegas to meet my partner and drive with her to LA. As we drove through the San Bernadino mountains, the air became thick with this dirty, yellow smog. At the top of one pass, there was a car stopped on the side of the road, and a mother holding a young baby was standing outside. I think it was the combination of the yellow smog and the little baby breathing it that made me recoil in aversion. As soon as we got to LA, I became sick with congestion and a bad cold.

Fortunately, there are a lot of health care professionals at these trade shows, and I met a wonderful Chinese medical doctor, who gave me a teaching I still remember and use. She told me that my experience made everything in me want to shut down, to constrict and stop breathing, as a way to keep myself safe from the pollution. But that is not the way to be safe. Instead, she advised me to keep my channels open, to keep breathing in everything and to let it pass through me completely. In other words, to realize that I am part of it all, but that I am not a victim of it. She was actually teaching me the Tibetan practice of tonglen, to breathe in the yellow, dirty smog and breathe out clear, light energy. I was reminded recently that our bodies are made for this, they are transformation machines. Just think of the natural processing they are constantly doing, clearing and detoxing our blood and organs. The teaching I got from the doctor is to stay open, to stay part of whatever is happening, no matter how toxic it may seem to be. This is the only way we'll be able to help transform our world.

So let's stop trying to resist what we don't want, which is our personal definition of pain in that moment. What happens when we do this? What if, instead of pushing away, we train ourselves to get more curious, more interested in what's happening? When a pain arises in our body, instead of contracting, can we put some open attention on it, investigating this new sensation. What is it made of, and is it changing? We can do this same thing with our emotions and our stories about life.

When we train in welcoming everything, we let down all our defenses. My favorite line in the Course in Miracles is, "In defenselessness my safety lies." This is what we are considering here, the possibility that we can go through life without the need to defend or control. When we begin to examine this possibility through deep looking, it may seem impossible. And it is, unless it is done one moment at a time. We know we can only practice in this moment, and then in this one and this one, and when we do this, everything becomes possible.

Meditation moment: So let's stop and return to our breathing. We can take a breath and release any resistance in this moment. We can feel our defenses floating away, like dropping a cape from our shoulders. Let the cape fall to the ground and let mother earth absorb it. Feel the lightness in your body, let your shoulders relax and your whole posture adjust around this freedom.

There are very good questions that come up when we consider living in this way of openness, of welcoming everything. The first one is: Really? This feels nice, but

isn't it foolish? How about the need for boundaries? Won't we be giving up trying to make the world a better place?

The Two Truths

When these kinds of questions come up in us, it's a clue that we need to remind ourselves of the most wonderful secret in the heart of the dharma: the two truths or the two dimensions of reality. This teaching tells us that we live a multi-dimensional life: both in the everyday, historical world of duality, and in the ultimate or absolute dimension. Our challenge, as students of the Buddha, is to live fully each moment in both of these dimensions simultaneously. This is the only way we can come to understand our world, all the horrible things happening, and how when one aspect of life may seem to improve, another seems to get worse.

Brother Phap Linh explains it this way: "When considering the teaching of the two dimensions of reality, we don't try to get away from the historical and take refuge in the ultimate. Instead, we learn to be skillful in applying the two ways of seeing, moving smoothly between the two views with the practice of looking deeply. To find the ultimate truth, we must look deeply into the historical truth. When we look deeply into a flower, we see that it's not only a flower, but also the clouds, rain, earth, and sunlight that have given rise to it. We can look deeply into any phenomenon, and what we find is a tightly woven net of relations. In each apparently separate thing, we find the whole cosmos."

As bodhisattvas in training, our aspiration is to relieve suffering. But this doesn't mean we need to fix everything. As a matter of fact, Thay used to say that he wouldn't want to live in a world with no suffering, because then there would be no compassion. So we learn to see suffering as a gift, even as we help to relieve it. How do we do this? We rely first on the wisdom of impermanence. We look deeply into the suffering and notice change happening. We give ourselves fully to what is happening right now, and our open hearts help to change and transform the situation. In the midst of suffering there is connection and intimacy and joy and even delight. We've probably all had times that were so difficult, and yet there were moments of deep meaning, love, and even joy interwoven. If you haven't had a moment like this yet, life will surely serve one up to you if you are open.

The secret is that the only way to be an effective change-maker is to start with reality, to be fully present to life as it is. This is the first noble truth: we need to wake up from denying reality. We need to give up seeing ourselves as separate, as controllers of our life, and open to the interconnectedness of each thought, word, and action. We need to rest in the potential of the collective consciousness.

We rest in the reality of the ultimate dimension, that tells us that there is no birth and no death, there is only continuation. That there is no separation, only connection. That there is no completely good or bad, there is only moving in the direction of well-being or away from it. And that love is the foundation, the driving force in our seemingly chaotic world.

Brother Phap Linh says: “From the perspective of the ultimate dimension, we’re all part of an unbroken web of relations. Everything is in everything else, and there are in fact no separate entities. According to this view, birth and death are concepts that are incompatible with our true nature. The challenge of these teachings is that both the historical and the ultimate are true. This is hard to accept when the two ways of seeing appear to contradict each other so completely. But the two truths—the ultimate and the historical—depend on each other and can only manifest together. Understanding this is the key to applying these teachings.”

He continues: “Looking into our own body, we find our ancestors—both genetic and spiritual. It’s our genetic and cultural inheritance that has to a very large extent determined how we speak, think, and act today. Our body contains all our human ancestors, but also all our more-than-human ancestors. Our body is an expression of the whole history of life on planet Earth. In fact, the entire history of the cosmos has given rise to this moment that we’re now living. And this very moment is the ground of the whole future unfolding of the cosmos. Looking deeply into the present, we discover the interconnection of past, present, and future—the interbeing of the three times. This is the view from the ultimate in the dimension of time.”

Grounded in the ultimate reality of love, we learn to show up for each precious moment. In this way, we are able to respond to all of life, especially to the difficulties, with equanimity and caring. When we understand that love is the fuel of the ultimate, the foundation of everything, we have the courage to train to respond by moving *towards* what is difficult instead of away. And in this way we learn to not resist, which is the first step towards learning to welcome.

Strong healthy boundaries are crucial right now. Openness fosters clear boundaries when it draws from our core values, our character. We return, over and over, to the teachings of the Mindfulness Trainings, welcoming their wisdom and compassionate way of living. The fruit of this practice is knowing what to do in any situation and becomes our natural response to life. Strong inner boundaries

allow us to respond with wisdom and compassion instead of with a triggered reaction. The pendulum of reaction keeps the suffering spiraling. The wheel of samsara is this triggered reaction that keeps us locked into the illusion of duality. The way off the endless cycle, to liberation, is through embracing the reality of love, by letting it fill every cell, until there is room for everything: nothing is separate, nothing is left out.

We'll be circling back to the teaching of the two truths throughout our year together, as this understanding is crucial to being able to offer a way forward for our species and our planet. So let's learn to apply it in our daily lives. I personally believe that this is a time of great creativity. It's known that great chaos can also be the fuel for great creativity. This is precisely why we need to remain open, why we need to Welcome Everything. We don't want to miss the elegant solution to our urgent needs because we are looking in the wrong direction, or discounting where it seems to be coming from. We need to be front and center, eyes and hearts open, cultivating Don't Know mind. We can tell that answers these days won't be coming from traditional institutions or leaders. Van Jones, the wise commentator on public life, instructs us to "look for the antibodies," which will show up as little sparks of creative solutions that start to be seen in our collective response to events. Perhaps we need to look to our artists, and the artist within, to find a path forward.

So let's move with awareness through the many moments of each day, asking: is love here? Remembering that love is a feeling, yes, but not only a feeling, that you don't have to have the feeling of love to know that it is present. Can you train yourself to see love in each moment, beyond feelings? Can you share a piece of your attention of whatever drama is unfolding with the awareness that there is love here? Let's all explore creative ways of letting love appear in the most difficult and mundane moments. Kind of like a Where's Waldo? game, with love making itself known. This is a great practice. Teacher Jean Houston used to call finding love in difficult moments as recognizing "God in her distressing disguise." In beauty and delight, in anguish and sorrow, can we see the face of love? Let this be our work the next few months, sharing and inspiring one another in ways to do this. Letting go of perceptions, of categories of thinking, starting with a clean slate to paint a new picture of reality. Seeing beneath flashy, distracting appearances that are trying to get our attention.

Irish novelist Niall Williams describes this practice of recognizing the ultimate dimension in his novel, *This is Happiness*.

“He smiled, quoting himself: ‘This is happiness.’ It was a condensed explanation, but I came to understand him to mean you could stop at, not all, but most of the moments of your life, stop for one heartbeat and, no matter what the state of your head or heart, say *This is happiness*, because of the simple truth that you were alive to say it. We can all pause right here, raise our heads, take a breath and accept that *This is happiness*.”

Or, as Thay used to say, “this is a happy moment.”

Poet Rosemary Wahtola Trommer expresses our aspiration to Welcome Everything in this poem about the generally disliked tick:

Not the tick, no.
Surely it is not sacred.
Do not try to tell me so.
Repulsive tiny blood suckers.
I do not wish to be impressed
by their survival, do not want
to respect how they have thrived
since the first flowering plants
arrived on earth over
one hundred million years ago.
I do not want to praise
their hard protective shells, nor how
efficiently they swell,
nor the ease with which they sense
moisture, heat, vibration.
Rather to vilify what disgusts me.
Repulsive little carriers of sickness.
Vile little vectors of disease.
What joy is there in knowing
a tick is so effective and good
at doing what a tick was made to do?
Could it be greater than the perverse joy
I get from my hatred? It is clear
my repulsion does not affect the tick.
Oh, clenched heart. Oh, clenched fist.
Where is the line between what I love
and what I resist?
Is it true there is holiness in everything?

How do I wound myself
when my heart and hand are closed?
Let my prayer not be to fall in love,
but to open to the prayer I do not yet know.

Three Types of Awareness

I'd like to spend the rest of our time tonight offering some ways to deepen our meditation practice. Meditation is a field of great exploration, always available to us. Some of us are adept at meditation; and even if we are experienced, longtime meditators, some of us may not feel that we have an understanding of the potential of this practice. To be clear, we aren't trying to levitate or create any esoteric experiences. Instead, we want to become skilled at ways to transform suffering and to blossom into our full potential. For some of us, this might mean taking our meditation practice to a deeper level. So I'll try to describe a few steps of doing this.

I've been practicing for a while with 3 types of awareness. Since all systems are arbitrary, this isn't something to concretize or try to use if it's not helpful to you right now, but it may be useful for awhile in your practice, or at some later time in your discovery of yourself. The teacher Alan Wallace and others offer aspects of what I'm going to share with you today.

When I identify these three types of awareness, I can learn to observe when each is operating, and then start to identify when each one is most useful and appropriate for various situations in my life. It gives me more ways to be skillful in navigating both my internal and external worlds. These practices build on each other, but one isn't better than another. Learning to identify which we are doing and to practice each one successfully, is a skill that will increase our freedom, peace, and joy.

Briefly, here they are:

Focused Awareness is great for settling the mind, for finding our place in the here and now. This is mindfulness and concentration practice as most of us know it. Uniting mind and body brings peace and a refuge, a sanctuary where there may have been chaos. The tagline for the new book, *The Sirens' Song*, by Chris Hayes, is: "how attention became the world's most endangered resource." This skill of focused awareness could not be more needed in our society right now.

Investigative Awareness is where we invite past experiences into our field of awareness and allow acceptance and understanding to arise. It is the heart of the practice of deep looking. This is a way to understand and transform wounds held in our bodies, as well as to develop and nourish our capacity for joy.

Open Awareness is where equanimity and open-heartedness dwell. Its quality is inclusiveness, the ability to see everything clearly and without filters, without prejudice or preference. Master Sheng-Yen says, “If you can maintain a mind of equanimity, you are free, no matter what the conditions.”

We know our minds are made up of sense impressions, thoughts and feelings developed through our entire lives and before, from memories of experiences, both internal and external. Our response to life is informed by these past experiences, which predict how we’ll respond now. We meditate to be free of responding to life conditioned by our past. When we meditate, we start with focused awareness, and when we concentrate on an object, like our breath, we turn down the volume on everything else, and our mind settles. When we are truly settled, we can release that attention and our mind becomes a field of open awareness, where thoughts still come and go but our attention has no need to stick to them. Here we understand that the *space* of awareness is different than the *contents* of awareness, and this is a level of freedom. We can invite up something in our store consciousness that may be begging for our attention, a memory or a current issue, and give it space to be known. This is the transformational practice of deep looking. From here we can move into open or non-dual awareness, where thoughts of doer and doing are left behind. We lose the sense of “I”, as well as any awareness of good/bad, self/other. The dualities that underlie cognition melt into a big soup of the Now. And we find ourselves in the Ultimate dimension.

So let’s go more deeply into each of these 3 awarenesses.

1. Focused Awareness is our practice.

This is mindfulness and concentration. Aware of distraction, letting go of distraction. With gentleness and firmness. Doing the heavy lifting of disciplining the puppy, letting go of thoughts and training our mind to stay where we want it. Focused awareness is the basis for all practice and we can’t really get far without a certain mastery of it.

For me, this practice is like the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths remind us to wake up and accept all of life, the pain as well as the pleasure, and most important, to identify the suffering that is self-created, and to learn how to stop

doing that. So focused awareness offers the ability to wake up and reclaim our lives in this moment, to channel our attention into what is right now. If we feel agitated and distracted, our practice is to stay present, to observe the ever-changing nature of that agitation. While our heart continues to hold the intention to rest in peacefulness and stillness.

Our most basic practices include, first, being aware of our in-breath and our out-breath. When we use the gatha which instructs us to follow our in-breath all the way, to follow our out-breath all the way, we are developing our concentration, our ability to keep the attention that we have lassoed in the corral. We do this by using an object for our attention, our breath within us, or an object outside us, like a candle or a flower, or a sound, like the sound of the bell.

As experienced meditators, we know many of the benefits that come with developing this practice. It brings calm, a settling, a resting. I love Thay's steps to healing: stopping, calming, resting, healing, transforming. It gives us a steadiness, a groundedness in the midst of everything. A line in one of our verses says, "in concentration, my heart is at peace". When the mind is settled, peace arrives like a beloved guest.

Focused awareness is a wonderful practice when we are agitated or distracted, even in a subtle way. I think perhaps some people have a more settled nature, but for me, I feel my idle is always set a little high; instead of resting in the moment, I am poised for action. This is why I need this practice every time I first sit down to meditate, and almost always throughout my day, to teach me to rest right here and now, with what is.

Let's do 10 breaths in focused awareness; you may count your breaths or say silently, "in, out". Notice your body and your internal feelings as you do this.

2. Investigative Awareness, which helps us practice deep looking for insight and to nourish our happiness.

Thay teaches that, when we are settled in focused awareness, we can choose to invite to consciousness an issue, a problem, or something we are curious about. Anchored in the steadiness that we have developed, our mind can offer up a message, of healing, of inspiration: something that will enrich our lives. It can also offer what is just below our conscious attention, asking for space to be known. This is how wisdom develops for us, in these simple moments when we are still and clear enough to let go of filters and limited perceptions, and to experience life from an expanded, broader view.

Thay says: “Meditation is the practice of looking deeply into the nature of your suffering and your joy. Through the energy of mindfulness, through concentration, looking deeply into the nature of our suffering makes it possible for us to see the deep causes of that suffering. If you can keep mindfulness and concentration alive, then looking deeply will reveal to you the true nature of your pain. And freedom will arise as a result of your sustaining a deep vision into the nature of your pain. Solidity, freedom, calm, and joy are the fruits of meditation.”

I choose this practice when there is an underlying issue nagging at me that needs to be addressed. I also use it when I find myself focusing on the many chores of life and not so much on joy, beauty, and play. Currently, I am practicing deep looking with an issue from my past, an old wound that is at least partly inherited trauma. Maybe I’ll be able to report on my process in my next talk. The key is to maintain our meta cognition, our awareness that we are choosing to focus on something without becoming caught in the story of that thing. This takes practice but can open and release stuck ideas and sensations.

The teacher Thomas Hubl explains that traumatic experiences can become frozen in our bodies if we are incapable of addressing them at the time. He likens this to the freezers in our kitchens, which are continually working to freeze our food. We don’t think about our freezers much, but we are paying for electricity every month to keep them functioning. In the same way, there is a price we are paying to keep our frozen experiences stored in our bodies; our payment comes from our life force. It takes energy to keep our wounds frozen. When we are able to invite them up through the practice of deep looking -- as Thay says, “to invite them to tea”, transformation can happen. The release of the life force that was keeping them frozen gives us more lightness, more energy, more joy. This is ongoing work for all of us who want to live our best lives.

So we start with focused awareness, and when we are settled we allow something—an object or thought or feeling, from within or without -- to come to awareness, and investigate it with openness and curiosity. Sometimes the invitation is already there, as something new, either a delight or a concern, arises and asks for your attention. You can set an intention to welcome what needs your loving attention, to make itself known.

3. Open Awareness

With the calm and steadiness of focused awareness, with the openness and curiosity of investigative awareness, we can now open the field of awareness to all

sensations on the inside and outside. Equally aware of everything within and without, like shining a lantern on everything, nothing grabbing special attention. Sometimes this is called choiceless awareness, but Thay prefers open awareness because he says there is always a choice of where to put your awareness.

This kind of awareness gives us clarity. We are able to let go of false and limited perceptions. We all know how our biases create false perceptions in us. Many summers ago a difficult friend came to stay while working at a temporary job. The job was extended and she ended up staying longer than planned. Several years later, I confidently told the story that she stayed with us for 3 months. And then I heard her say that she had stayed for 3 weeks! So I looked back in my calendar and found that it was actually 6 weeks, twice as long as she said but only half the time I had experienced it to be. I learned in a big way how my perceptions skew my view of reality, even when easily measurable.

So the practice of open awareness can help us clear our view, letting go of biased perceptions so we have a more accurate relation to reality. The field of open awareness makes room for everything and everyone. Letting go of needing anything to be different than what is right now.

I have experienced open awareness on longer retreats with the sangha. But I first identified it as my practice after an experience around 15 years ago. I was living in Ashland, and though I had many commitments I was mostly free to create the activities and priorities in my life. I began to believe that what I needed for my spiritual growth was to have a long, silent retreat time, either in a group or by myself, but I became frustrated that even though I was retired, I couldn't seem to find the place, time, and situation that might work for me.

That summer a friend invited me to spend the night at a house on a lake in the woods about an hour from home. She was relaxing alone after the joy and chaos of a family visit. I arrived about mid-day and found her on the deck overlooking the lake, tall trees all around under a blue sky with puffy clouds. We chatted for a while and then dropped into a comfortable silence, staying this way through the afternoon. At one point she said, we can go to the lodge for dinner, and I murmured okay, and then we just kept sitting there, being with the water, the birds, the trees, and the clouds. Feeling the sunshine on our skin, the soft breeze. Finally she went in the house and brought out some simple snacks. When it got dark we went to bed, then got up in the morning, resumed our places on the deck, and began again. "We could go to the lodge for breakfast" she said, and I again murmured something back. We continued sitting in deep enjoyment through the

morning, until another friend arrived around mid-day. I took my leave and drove home. With me I took the deep nourishment that I had been longing for when searching for a long, silent retreat. Just giving myself to the beauty of nature for 24 hours had filled my senses and my heart. I needed nothing more. This is when I fell in love with open awareness practice.

Alan Wallace, in his wonderful book, *Minding Closely*, describes an unusual result in a study testing the acoustic startle response. Experimenters generated the sound of a gunshot six feet away from a meditating subject who was not expecting it. The startle response comprises reflexive reactions in the eyes, muscle contractions, and other involuntary physiological effects. Even if subjects are warned about the sound, they usually can't help flinching.

However, one meditator resting in open awareness reacted much less than the scientists had seen before. As a control, he was tested when he wasn't practicing open awareness and he flinched the same as everyone else.

Here's what he said about his experience: "When I'm resting in open awareness, my attention is hovering right here in the present moment. At the instant of the gunshot, my attention is already vigilantly aware of the present moment, so the sound doesn't draw my attention anywhere. There is no place to go. On the other hand, if my mind is caught up in ordinary thoughts and distractions, the gunshot yanks my chain and I react reflexively."

Wallace continues to explain the practice: "Attending to phenomena does not entail the mind's darting out to grasp whatever appears. Let your awareness rest in its own place, not chasing after objects, labeling them, or engaging with them. Let it stay home. A metaphor which describes this state is an old man watching other people's children play. In open awareness, you attend to whatever comes up, while awareness remains motionless and unattached. Non-grasping.

He continues, "As your practice deepens, you will get the taste of what is called the fusion of stillness and motion. This means that awareness is still, loose, and relaxed, while attending with clear perception and discerning intelligence to myriad phenomena coming and going. Even though everything rises and falls in a fizzy display, you remain at rest and still. The quality of simultaneous stillness and motion is enabled by releasing grasping on to thoughts and sensory impressions. Awareness becomes spacious, and events arise within a space of stillness."

I believe this is medicine we need right now in our world, to help us not get caught in the food for fear and uncertainty being flashed before us daily.

Pema Chodron speaks of the element of gentleness that naturally comes with this awareness. She says, “Gentleness in our practice and in our life helps to awaken bodhichitta. It’s like remembering something. This compassion, this clarity, this openness are like something we have forgotten. Sitting here being gentle with ourselves, we’re rediscovering something. It’s like a mother reuniting with her child; having been lost to each other for a long, long time, they reunite. The way to reunite with bodhichitta is to lighten up in your practice and in your whole life.”

Let’s try a short version of open awareness together.

Eyes open, softly focused, settle your mind and body by following your in-breath and out-breath. Be aware of your body and your six senses: seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, and thinking. Bring yourself into a naturally relaxed and alert state of awareness.

Let your will be passive while maintaining an intelligent, discerning mindfulness. Watch thoughts and feelings rise, stay, and then disappear. Allow all thoughts, images, sensations, and memories to arise without interference or ownership. Witness appearances just as they are. In the felt, there is just the felt; in the seen, just the seen; in the heard, just the heard. Observe without conceptualizing or making up stories.

Rest in the beauty of what is. Feel yourself part of everything, make room in your heart for everything.

Open awareness enhances our ability to see patterns and the causes of things, which brings insight and wisdom. Most important, from this understanding love arises. This field is vibrating with love.

Intention is still with you, and manifests in harmony with all that is present. There is no stress, no navigating or manipulating. Just resting and allowing all that is, with effortless love pouring out for all beings. This reminds me of when Buddha gave a dharma talk by holding up a flower. Nothing needs to be said. Love this world and everything/everyone that makes it up. Include all, difficult as it might seem to be at times. When we are anchored and resting in open awareness, love is what naturally blooms. And with it, despair dissolves and hope colors the landscape.

This is how Thay expresses it in his book, *The Sun My Heart*:

“Throughout your meditation, keep the sun of your awareness shining. Like the physical sun, which lights every leaf and every blade of grass, our awareness lights our every thought and feeling, allowing us to recognize them, be aware of their birth, duration, and dissolution, without judging or evaluating, welcoming or banishing them.

It is important that you do not consider awareness to be your ‘ally,’ called on to suppress the ‘enemies’ that are your unruly thoughts. Do not turn your mind into a battlefield. Opposition between good and bad is often compared to light and dark, but if we look at it in a different way, we will see that when light shines, darkness does not disappear. It doesn’t leave; it merges with the light. It becomes the light. To meditate does not mean to fight with a problem. To meditate means to observe. Your smile proves it. It proves that you are being gentle with yourself, that the sun of awareness is shining in you, that you have control of your situation. You are yourself, and you have acquired some peace. It is this peace that makes a child love to be near you.”

For me, this is the explanation of the story of the Buddha walking through a battlefield with a gentle smile, dead and dying soldiers all around. This image confounded me for quite a while. Now I see that painful as it is, our love can hold even the battlefield, when our hearts are big enough, when our love is deep enough. We learn to hold the reality of war and conflict with deep love for our broken world.

“The darkness doesn’t disappear: it merges with the light.” I’ve been contemplating this statement, finding stories of my own when this insight has appeared. Many years ago, I had my annual cancer-screening tests at the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, a big hospital focused on cancer treatment. I remember when I started on this journey over 15 years ago, going into places like this, filled with sick people. It was very strange to me and I felt strong aversion, and along with it a need to keep myself separate. Now I find, walking in and seeing everyone in various stages of health and sickness, life and death, my heart opens and a tenderness arises that I rarely experience elsewhere. The courage and vulnerability I witness connects me to each person. Love is the transformation of our suffering, bringing meaning to all we have to face.

Open awareness is a non-transactional field. We don’t do something to get something here. We just allow ourselves to be, to give and receive as appropriate. Endlessly giving and endlessly receiving. Dwelling here is how we learn the appropriate response to each situation of life.

This is our superpower: to Choose Love. To recognize, accept, allow and to love, as best we can, whatever shows up. As the Discourse on Love says: “Our love will know no obstacles, our hearts will be absolutely free from hatred and enmity.” I’ve chanted this phrase for years, but can I live it? This is the place that true transformation comes from, for ourselves and for our world. This is transformation at the base. Without resistance, our lives flow in joy and ease. It’s possible to increase this attitude of loving acceptance, of keeping our hearts open, no matter what, each day. In this way we slowly become the heart of great compassion. We make room for everything, pushing nothing away. We are able to love each thing into being its truest self, including ourselves. Rumi says: “When you do things from your soul, the river itself moves through you. Freshness and a deep joy are signs of the current.”

Can we offer this great acceptance to ourselves? With all our quirks and failings? With our graspingness and our stinginess and our sleepiness? Can we turn inward and see the immense courage it takes to show up for life, with all our fragility and vulnerability? Can we understand that the only way to transform our hearts, our lives, and our world is to let the darkness merge with the light, to open our hearts to it all?

When we respond from this place of loving acceptance, our actions can be a source of connection and healing. When we have the clarity to see what is needed, when we have the openness to turn towards instead of away, then when we reach out to help, it is in gratitude and humility. Our actions are our only true belongings. Let them arise from open and clear hearts, from deep intentions.

This is the place from which bodhisattvas step out, this is how we can effect real change. The bridge between stillness and action is our intention, our deepest desire. They sometimes call it the energy of prayer. It is our rudder; it is how we direct the spiritual energy generated from our practice. It is how we help. It is why we continually deepen our understanding of our values through living with our ethical guidelines, the mindfulness trainings.

Our path is traditionally described as the path of non-harming. It took me a while to get comfortable with that phrase, preferring to state things in the positive. But now I see the truth in it: One of my daily intentions is to take good enough care of myself that I don’t spill my suffering onto others, so I don’t cause harm, intentionally or unintentionally. To do this I need to be free of judgment, of hidden agendas and ego needs. Then I can walk into a situation and not muck it up with my own ideas. I can listen and see what needs to be done, and from that place of

clarity and emptiness I can make a step, hold out a hand, respond creatively. That is kindness.

So we take the energy of clarity and compassion generated by our stillness, and we direct it to healing through focused intention. We step out because deep within us is the wisdom that being and doing are not separate, that inside and outside don't exist.

Shozan Jack Haubner says, "I dissolve in activity, in relationship with my surroundings, so that the inner world can flow out, and the outer world can arrive within. I have to both put in effort and know when to let go. There's a natural balance, a dance, between embracing and releasing: turning your surroundings into yourself, like the tree that absorbs carbon dioxide, and turning yourself into your surroundings, like the same tree releasing oxygen."

We step out because this is how we find our humanity, our healing, and our connection. This is where we touch our Buddha nature. Thomas Hubl tells us that presence grounds stress and will go viral in the presence of others. This is what Thay described when he told the story of the boat people in a huge storm. If everyone freaked out, it was likely the boat would overturn and everyone would drown, but if even one person in the boat remained calm, it was much more likely that the boat would make it safely to shore. We have been taught how to be that person in the boat, and I believe that this is our greatest work right now. This is the most valuable thing we can offer the world in this moment: to remain calm, to stay present, to not be caught up in all the juicy material for fear being flashed in front of our eyes daily. To maintain sovereignty of our hearts and minds and bodies, so that our calm and ease and joy will be our expression of life wherever we are, and people will feel it and be helped. As bodhisattvas in training, learning how to help, we find we have been given the most valuable tools needed right now. We cannot possibly do this alone, but we can do it together, in our community of love.

The poet **Maya Angelou** writes to her daughter: "My wish for you is that you continue. Continue to be who you are, to astonish a mean world with your acts of kindness. The effect you have on others' lives is the highest expression of your own."

So we return to our intention, to setting the course of our day. We aspire to be as solid as a mountain, as open as the blue sky, so we can welcome everything and push nothing away. Let's spend the next few months exploring deeply the ways

meditation can help us; let's invite into our awareness the reality of the ultimate dimension of love every day. And let's do it together.