

Householder Series:

The Eightfold Noble Path

-- Right Understanding

This meditation practice, as many of you have done with this day of sitting and walking, was actually quite a lot. Some people will start with a 20-minute sitting and do that for a number of months, or go to a class and have some instruction and sit for a little bit. There are people who also will come to a ten-day retreat. We've even had a few kind of unusual people sign up for a three-month retreat who had never meditated before, and say, "Well, I guess I'll just do it." But as you can discover, even in just one day of sitting, though some things are interesting and you learn some from it, it's also not so easy. There aren't a lot of distractions and diversions here. It's pretty simple. All that's really left for you in this place is your own body and mind, and there's not a lot to take one away from that.

What is the essence of meditation practice? Here is a story. After the Buddha was enlightened he was walking down the road in a very happy state. He was supposed to have been quite a handsome prince before going off to be a monk. So here's this handsome prince now recently enlightened, wearing golden robes and obviously quite happy, and very special from all accounts. And he met some people and they said, "You seem very special. What are you, are some kind of an angel or a deva?" He seemed inhuman in some way. "No." "Well, are you some kind of a god then?" "No." "Well, then are you some kind of a wizard or magician?" "No," he replied. "Well, are you a man?" "No," he said. "Then what are you?" And he answered, "I am awake."

And in those three words --"I am awake"-- he gave the whole teaching which Buddhism contains. To be a Buddha is to be one who has awakened, awakened to the nature of life and death and the world in which we live, awakened to the body and mind. So the purpose of practicing meditation, the Buddhist and other traditions, is not to become a meditator, or a spiritual person, or a Buddhist, or to join something. Rather, it is to understand this capacity we have as humans to awaken.

What is that which we can awaken to, what is the Dharma which we can awaken to? *Dharma* is the Sanskrit word and *Dhamma* is the Pali word which refers to that which is universal, to the laws of the universe, teachings which describe it. The Dharma as a law is that the way things work are always here to be discovered; they're quite immediate.

There's a story of a pious man who very much believed in God. One day, at the place where he dwelled, it started to rain heavily and it rained and rained, and a big flood came. He went from the first floor to the second floor of his house and the water rose until he was on the roof. Someone rowed by and said, "Get in, my friend, I'll save you; the water is rising." He said, "No, I believe in

God; I really have faith; I believe." So he sent the rowboat away. It rained more and the water got all the way up to his neck. Another rowboat came by, picking up people. "Get in, my friend, I'll save you." "No, thank you. I have trust. I have lived my whole life. I believe in God; no need." The rowboat went away. It got up to his nose so he could just barely breathe. And a helicopter came over and lowered down a rope. "Come up, my friend, I'll save you." "No, thank you. I believe, I have faith, I trust." So the helicopter went away.

It rained some more and he drowned. He goes to heaven after that. Soon after that he gets an interview with God. So he goes in, and he sits down and pays his respects, and then he says, "You know, I just don't understand. Here I was your faithful servant. I was so trusting, and prayed, and so believing, and I just don't understand what happened to me." And he recounts all of his circumstances. "Where were you when I needed you?" God looks up and kind of scratches his head and says, "I don't understand it either. I sent you two rowboats and a helicopter."

We wait for God to come in some big flash or our spiritual awakening to be some wonderful other worldly experience. What the Dharma is, and what we can awaken to, is the truth that is here when we leave our fantasies and memories and things behind and come into the present.

What are these laws, what is it? First, there is the Dharma which is described as the law of cause and effect, or Karma, which means by one teacher's definition, "To keep it simple, 'karma' means you don't get away with nothin'." But in a more explicit way, it means that we become what we do, or we create how our future will be. For example, if we practice being angry all the time, in a while, when a situation arises, that will be our response to it, and it will create that in other people; that will be the kind of society we end up in. If we practice being loving, that becomes the way of what will happen to us in the future.

When the Buddha spoke to people who were interested in happiness -- which some people are -- they said, "How can we be happy?" He said, "Well, one way is to understand the law of karma. If you cultivate generosity, kindness, awareness and giving. you will be happy because you'll learn that it's pleasant, and also the way that karma works is that your world will become more of a cycling rather than fear and holding. You will discover happiness in this generosity."

He said, "If you're kind to people, if you maintain a basic level of non-harming -- what's called Virtue -- if your words are honest and helpful, if your actions are truthful and helpful and based on kindness, your world will start to become kind. Inside you'll feel kinder and happier; outside people will treat you that way. The law of Karma is one of the first things you observe if you practice mindfulness and awareness. This is one thing you can discover through practice.

A second thing you can discover is that there are two places that we can live. There are many places, but one is to live in our fantasy, in our thoughts about things; and the other is to be more here in our bodies, in our eyes, our nose, in our senses, and the direct experience of things.

For me -- says Don Juan -- the world is incredible because it is stupendous, mysterious, awesome, unfathomable. My interest has been to convince you that you must learn to make every act count. You must learn to assume responsibility for being here in this

marvelous world, in this marvelous time, for in fact you will learn that you are only here for too short a time, a very short while, too short for witnessing all the marvels of it.

So one way is to be kind of lost in thoughts and fantasies, and the other is that while we have this life, to come into it; to live in our physical bodies, to be aware of the senses; to open, to see what they have to teach us. When we do that and we pay attention, we start to see some of the characteristics of the Dharma or the life in which we live.

One characteristic is impermanence.

Thus shall you think of this fleeting world -- it says in one Buddhist sutra -- a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a phantom and a dream.

That as you look, the more closely you observe, the more you realize that everything you look at is in change. Seeing changes, hearing changes, smelling, tasting and physical sensations are changing; all the experiences in the body and mind, all the experiences of the senses change.

It seems solid -- That's the illusion of *santati*. -- It's like a movie. And when you watch the screen and get caught in the story, it seems like it's very real. But when you turn your attention to the projector, or slow it down, or focus your awareness very carefully, you start to see that it's one frame after another, one appearing and dissolving and the next arising.

It's so for our life; it's really a process of change. That's so because things don't last. If you have something that lasts in your life, please raise your hand. Has anyone gotten any mental states of any kind to last very long? Someone once raised a hand and said, "Yes, ignorance. It's lasted my whole life." But basically it's change. You sit here for one day -- you don't even have to be a very adept meditator to get the point that it moves all the time, that it changes. And because things don't last, if we're attached to them being a certain way, what happens? This is one of the laws. What happens? We suffer, or we get disappointed -- not because we should. You can be attached as much as you like, but even though you're attached, does it stop it from changing? You have a nice mental state and you try and hold on to it, does it last anyway?

You start to see the laws of things, that things are impermanent, that attachment doesn't work, and that there must be some other way. There is actually what Alan Watts called, "the wisdom of insecurity," the ability to flow with things, to see them as a changing process. You also see not only are they impermanent and ungraspable, but that there's suffering if we're attached to them, and that there's pain as well as pleasure in this world; it's part of what we were born into. If you decide to get off on this planet and get one of these things with ten little things on the end here and ten little things on the end there, that grows for awhile, and that you put old dead plants and animals in, and mush them up in order to get it to kind of move around -- if you choose one of these things which you have, it's too late already. What is the nature of it? It grows up, it grows old, it dies. Sometimes it gets sick, sometimes it feels good, sometimes it hurts; there's pleasure and pain in it. Anybody have one that doesn't hurt sometimes? If you don't want that, you've got to go to another planet

because it's not the way things are here.

You sit, and you say, "I'm just going to be with my body and mind," and what do you find? Sometimes you find it's pleasant and sometimes it's painful; sometimes it's quiet, sometimes it's restless, and you begin to relate to what Zorba called, "It's the whole catastrophe," all of it, instead of fearing the painful things and running away all the time, and grasping after pleasant things, hoping that somehow by holding them they'll last and seeing that they don't.

My teacher, Achaan Chah used to wander around the monastery at times and talk to people and just say, "Are you suffering much today?" And if you said, "Yes," he said, "Oh, you must be quite attached," and kind of giggle and go along. There wasn't much more to say. You come to see that you don't own this body because it changes by itself, that you rent this house; you get it for a little while, and you can honor it and feed it and walk it, and jog it if you want, but it's not yours to possess. You can begin to see, in fact, that none of these things are possessible because the nature of life is nonpossession. You're an accountant in the firm -- you get to count it for awhile and that's all.

We sit to awaken, and we awaken by coming into our bodies and our senses, and we start to see the laws which govern life so we can come into a wiser relationship with it. What does this mean for our lives? Well, this really teaches a way of wholeness and awareness, of bringing our body and mind together, our heart and actions, being conscious with our speech, conscious with our eating, conscious with walking, making them each a part of what allows us to grow and live. To do this means accepting the fact of impermanence, and of some pain and suffering, and the fact that we don't control it very much. I mean, you control some of it, but not very much, and in a really limited way. If you can't accept those things, then you will probably want to stay in your fantasy, because they're what you encounter when you come here.

Some people might ask, "Doesn't meditation fragment us away from the world? You say that it makes us more present." It can if we become attached to solitude, if we sit and try to get quiet and block everything out, close our eyes and ears and nose or go into a cave.

There's another story of an elderly woman in New York who goes to a travel agent and says, "Please get me a ticket to Tibet. I want to go see the guru." The travel agent says, "You know, it's a long trip to Tibet. You'd be much happier going to Miami." She says "I insist. I want to go." So this old lady gets a ticket, brings her things with her, gets on the plane and goes to India, gets the visa and the pass, takes the train up to Sikkim, gets a border pass, takes the bus up to the Tibetan plateau, and gets out. And they're all saying, "Where are you going?" "I must go see the guru." They say, "It's such a long way. You're an old lady. It's up in the mountains." She says, "I'm going. I have to see the guru." They say, "You know, you only get three words with him." "It doesn't matter, I am going." So she goes, and she gets on the horse in Tibet, because there are no roads in this part, gets to the foot of this large mountain, and all these pilgrims are saying, "Where are you going?" She says, "I want to see the guru." They say, "Remember, you get just three words." She says, "I know, I know." She gets in line, gets up there, finally past the guards at the door who say, "Three words only." She goes in and there's the guru sitting in his robes with a kind of scraggly beard. He looks up at her and she looks at him, and she says, "Sheldon, come home."

I tell it mostly for a laugh but the fact is that for us who live in the Bay Area, the spirituality that's going to work for us is not a spirituality of finding peace by leaving the world. It's not to say you shouldn't go and take a vacation in Yosemite or have periodic retreats. But fundamentally, for spiritual practice to be vital in our lives, it has to be what we can use in the supermarket, while we drive, when we're walking, when we're dealing with our families; to make everything a part of it, and not to escape.

Someone might ask in the same vein, "Doesn't meditation fragment us from the world?" It can if one tries to escape, but what we're training here is an awareness that can be used throughout our day.

What about social responsibility? We're on the brink of nuclear war. There is exploitation and injustice in every country. There are 40 wars going on right now, in Iraq, Iran, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Cambodia, Laos, Libya, Angola, Afghanistan, all these places, and God knows where else. And it's not just a story. It's painful for millions of people, as is starvation, as are 50,000 nuclear warheads which could literally destroy most of the human beings and many or most of the major animals that live on the planet in a painful way, easily, quickly.

One must listen to one's heart in this. It's interesting. You can make a compelling case for different sides. From that point of view you see that what's necessary is not to sit but to act. There is starvation. Nuclear war is imminent if we don't do something. There is compelling need, even in this very rich and affluent society, of people who are suffering in many ways. And what are we doing sitting around? It's quite convincing.

There is another side which is equally convincing, and that is: What is the cause of that starvation and all those wars, and that suffering? What do you think is the source of it? There's enough oil, there's enough food, there's enough resources on this planet. The cause of it is greed, and the cause of it is prejudice and hatred. We hate people of different religions, different skin color, different customs; we like our country, our family, our religion, our type. So there's hoarding, and there's grasping, and greed and hatred and ignorance. We've tried revolutions for many centuries. It's helped in some ways but in others it just keeps going around because we haven't touched the root of the problem. The way out of the root of the problem is for someone to discover what it means to not be caught up by anger, what it means to be free from that fear or that prejudice which arises in human hearts and minds, what it means to be unafraid of that which is painful as well as that which is pleasant -- to have the heart open to all of what the world presents.

We don't need more oil and food as much as we need somebody who understands how to avoid getting caught in anger and fear and prejudice. And that somebody is you. So instead of it being a luxury to meditate, from another point of view, it's a responsibility for anyone who can, to figure out in their own being, in their own life, what it means not to be caught by these forces, to learn some new way -- and then bring that to bear on the economic and social and political kinds of suffering as well in the world.

There's a favorite letter of mine from a Nobel Prize winner named George Wald, who is a biologist

at Harvard. He wrote it in response to an argument about the starting of a Nobel laureate sperm bank. Some irate feminist wrote into the paper saying, "Sperm banks, they should have an egg bank. Why just sperm?" He says:

You're right, Pauline. It takes an egg as well as a sperm to start a Nobel laureate. Everyone of them has had a mother as well as a father. Say all you want of fathers, their contribution to conception is really rather small.

Nobel laureates aside, there isn't much technically in the way of starting an egg bank. There are some problems but nothing so hard as involved in the other kinds of breeder reactors.

But think of a man so vain as to insist on getting a superior egg from an egg bank. Then he has to fertilize it. And when it's fertilized, where does he go with it, To his wife? "Here, dear," you can hear him saying, "I just got this superior egg from an egg bank and just fertilized it myself. Will you take care of it?" "I've got eggs of my own to worry about," she replies. "You know what you can do with your superior egg. Go rent a womb, and while you're at it, you better rent a room too."

You see, it just won't work. For the truth is that what one really needs is not Nobel laureates but love. How do you think one gets to be a Nobel laureate? Wanting love, that's how. Wanting it so bad one works all the time and ends up a Nobel laureate. It's a consolation prize.

What matters is love. Forget sperm banks and egg banks. Banks and love are incompatible. If you don't know that, you don't know bankers. So just practice loving. Love a Russian. You'd be surprised how easy it is, and how it will brighten up your morning. Love whales, Iranians, Vietnamese, not just here but everywhere. When you've gotten really good you can even try loving some of our politicians.

This is the other voice. He said this amazing thing, that even the Nobel Prize is a consolation prize because what human beings most want is to be honored, to be loved, to be recognized. And what the world most compellingly needs is someone who understands how not to get caught in these ancient human patterns of prejudice, fear and anger.

Doesn't meditation make people withdraw from the world anyway? One has seen that for sure. There's a fine teaching in the Buddhist tradition called, The Near Enemies. The near enemy of love is attachment. It masquerades like love, it feels like it, but it's separate. It says, "I love you but really I'm attached to you. I need you out there to make me whole." Rather, the sense of love is honoring and seeing our connection.

The near enemy to compassion is pity. "Oh, that poor person, they're suffering. I don't suffer, not me certainly,." but they all do, and it separates them again. The near enemy to equanimity or balance of mind is indifference. It feels like, "Ah, everything is fine basically because I don't give a shit. I don't care about anybody," believing that in not caring we can find some peace. Real

equanimity is when the heart begins to open and we find a capacity to experience all that the world presents -- with balance, with love, with openness.

Our training in meditation is not a running away from the world at all. It's really a sitting down right in the middle of it, paying attention to that which is pleasant and that which is painful, that which makes a lot of noise, that which is silent, and begin to listen to our relationship to it, to observe it, to learn from it, and learn a wise way of relating.

Then what is the heart of this inner way of practice? The heart of it is mindfulness, listening, paying attention to our bodies, to all the various energies, to the voices, paying attention when we eat. Which voice do you listen to when you stop a meal? Is it the belly which maybe speaks first and says, "Oh, I had enough. Comfortable, nice and full." And then the tongue chimes in, "Gee, but that fruit was so good, let's have a little more." And the eyes say, "Yeah, there's more of that other stuff too that we haven't finished yet." And you hear all these different voices. In our culture we don't listen to our bodies so much. Like James Joyce somewhere in *Ulysses* said something like, "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." We do in some fashion, you know.

The first foundation of mindfulness -- to become wise -- is to live in the physical reality of our body, to live in the feelings, to be aware of emotions, to be aware of the pleasant and neutral and unpleasant aspect of our experience, and to learn that we don't have to resist that which is painful and grasp that which is pleasant all the time. That's perhaps our conditioning, but in fact it doesn't lead to peace, it doesn't lead to happiness, because things change anyway. Even if you're attached to them they change.

It's an open-hearted and non-judging awareness which comes into the body and into the feelings and then observes the mind as well as its laws, the law of karma, the laws of impermanence, and begins to see how to relate to it all out of compassion, kindness and wisdom, which means seeing how it's really operating. Sometimes it gets very painful when you sit. Sometimes it's pleasant; you have bliss and light. Then you get attached. Sometimes it gets painful and then you want to avoid it.

Thomas Merton said at one point:

True prayer and love are learned in the hour when prayer becomes impossible and the heart is turned to stone.

Sometimes it's in the very greatest difficulties in our sitting or in our life that our heart opens the most, or we finally get the fact that we can't get attached to things and hold on to them; that they don't go the way we think but the way that they go. So wisdom begins to arise.

How then to work with the basic difficulties which arise in meditation? What to do when there's physical pain? As best you can, sit and quietly mentally note "pain, pain," paying attention. See if you can notice how it changes. Sit comfortably. Don't make pain for yourself. There's plenty in this life without it. But if you'll notice, sometimes it comes anyway. Then see if you can learn some balance with it. When you observe pain, one of three things will happen. Do you know what will happen if you observe it? Sometimes it will go away; sometimes it will stay the same; and

sometimes it will get worse. That's not your business.

Your job in meditation is to start to see things as they are; light and dark, and up and down, pleasant things and painful things; to open to them, to start to pay attention to all of what makes up our reality. That develops what is called in spiritual discipline, a heart of greatness. If you open the door to the outside, what do you get when you open it? You get whatever is out there. You get the weather for that day. And if you keep the door open, you get the changes in the weather. If you open your mind and your body and your heart, what do you get? You get everything. You get what's painful and what's pleasant. And there is a way to come to a new relationship with it.

In working with difficulties -- desire, anger, restlessness, doubt, fear which are the traditional hindrances which arise in meditation -- how can one work with them, how can one make one's spiritual practice so that these become workable?

There's a story in the community of George Gurdjieff of this obnoxious and very difficult man who finally left, for he was having such a hard time. Gurdjieff paid him to come back. Everyone was upset because they all had to pay a lot to live there, and here is Gurdjieff paying this old creepy guy who gets annoyed at everybody and is dirty. They asked him why he did that, and he said, "This man is like yeast for bread. Without him, you wouldn't really learn the meaning of patience or compassion or loving kindness. You wouldn't learn that about yourself."

So when these states of mind arise -- restlessness, desire, fear, wanting, worry, agitation, or judgment, if only it were somehow different than it is, "I don't like this" -- what to do with them? Sit in the very middle of them and study them. Note how they feel in the body. There's desire. Desire runs much of our world. If you watch TV that's all they sell is desire. Pay attention to see what it's like, how do you feel it in the body, what is it like in the mind. Give clear and careful mindful attention to it, without getting caught -- not suppressing it, or trying to get it go away, and not getting involved. Just noting, "desire, desire, wanting," until you come to see its nature and you come to some balance where you're not so caught up in it or afraid of it.

The same for anger. Most of us are either afraid of it and stuff it down or we act it out. See if when judgment or anger arises you can just sit and note, "angry, furious, judging," whatever it is, and feel it. Heat, movement, energy in the body, certain contractions, different qualities of mind, see if it is possible to experience that energy and learn from it. See how it changes, what it does to you, what its flavor is, its effect on you, and then maybe you can learn not to be quite so caught in it. It doesn't mean it won't still come, heaven knows, but your relationship to it can be a wiser one. Do it again and again -- with fear, with all the kinds of mental states that come up, especially the difficult ones -- until you can sit and allow them to come and go like cows or sheep in the meadow.

What if they're very strong, what if they're too difficult, they're really, really hard, what should you do? You're so restless you just can't stand it, what to do? Die! Be the first yogi to ever die of restlessness. Just say, "Fine, take me." Surrender to it and let it kill you. And what you discover if you do that is that in a way you die; what dies is your resistance to it, and that you just carry on. You discover this powerful capacity we have, if you work with it, to open to all of our experience and find some balance in it.

If you're more advanced, if you've done practice for awhile, you may also wish to work with the capacity one has to go into the very middle of something. If there's desire, anger, or fear, or whatever it is, not just to feel it, but see if you can find the very center of it and discover what's there, and maybe go through the center in some way. I'll just leave that as a *koan* for you right now.

Now, what about all the different kinds of meditation? Here one is learning Vipassana. How about Tibetan meditation, Zen or TM, and so forth? There are a lot of good ways to practice. There are these two students of a master who were arguing. One says, "It's really good to sit very still and not move and just work with whatever pain comes," and the other one says, "No, no, that's macho. You want to relax and be gentle, and just be aware, but you don't make a lot of effort in it." And they're arguing and they can't seem to get any answer. And they go to the master. One says, "You've really got to make effort to bring your mind back and to stay very present and not to move, and in that way you get through all this stuff. You learn how to be still in the middle of anything." And the master says, "You're right." And the other one says, "But wait a second. Don't you want to learn to be loving and gentle, to move if you really need to, and just to find a balance with it all, to be soft and not to struggle against it, but simply to open." The master says, "You're right." And a third student who was sitting there says, "But they can't both be right." And the master says, "And you're right too."

There are many good ways of meditation. There are some that are better than others, in the sense that some have a limited purpose, but there are many major schools of meditation which are wonderful if they develop awareness or mindfulness of the body, or the mind and the heart are sense-experienced, where you observe how the world is working. They can bring you to liberation, they can bring you to freedom. So it doesn't really matter which kind you've chosen. If you're doing Vipassana practice, wonderful! If what's accessible or interesting to you is Zen, fine! What's important is that you pick one and you stay with it and do it. It takes discipline. If you want to learn to play the piano, it takes more than just a day once in awhile, a few minutes here and there. If you're lucky, after a year you'll be able to play "Happy Birthday To You." If you really want to learn something in a full way -- tennis, piano, not to speak of training the mind and opening the heart -- it takes perseverance, patience and a systematic training. Pick a practice, use it, work with it every day, work with a teacher if you can, or in circumstances where you sit with other people. And in doing it over and over again, it starts to develop your capacity to open; it starts to train you to be more in the present moment; it starts to develop this sense of patience. When you sit and really feel what's in there, it brings a kind of compassion.

Now, what's the particular value of intensive retreats? What's the value of leaving the world to go off on a weekend or a ten-day retreat, or even a day here?. Why not just do it at home? There are two things to say. First again is a story of Mullah Nasrudin. He's out in his garden one day sprinkling bread crumbs around, and a friend comes by and says, "Mullah, why are you sprinkling those bread crumbs?" He says, " Oh, I do it to keep the tigers away." And the friend says, "But there aren't any tigers within thousands of miles of here." And Nasrudin says, "Effective, isn't it?"

One tends to get rote or go on automatic pilot in whatever one does. Have you noticed that? You learn how to do it, you master it a little bit, and then you check out. Part of the process of

meditation is to wake up from being on automatic pilot or Zombieland. It's kind of ironic because you come here and you walk around very slowly, you don't look at anybody, and you look more like a zombie. But inside it's a different story. What we're doing is breaking our habit. If you walk at your normal pace, la, la, la, and whistle while you walk down the street, what would happen most likely is that your mind would immediately go off some place else.

We use the form of intensive retreats, of a day or a weekend, to use the silence, to use a bit of stillness, to slow down, all as ways to break the habit of automatic pilot, to begin to awaken in a new situation. Then you can take that back to your daily life. We use it also because there is a great strength that comes in meditating in groups. Especially in the beginning it's hard to do, and you're sitting here and squirming, and everybody looks like they've been meditating for hundreds of years except you, and you'd be embarrassed to get up, so you stay with it, which is not a bad thing.

There's another reason for taking more than twenty minutes or half an hour or an hour a day for meditation, and that is, when you do it in a number of hours of succession, there's a greater possibility that you will really get concentrated, and that you'll get quiet and silent inside. And in doing so, it becomes possible to see more deeply, to kind of dissolve the thought and go to the nature of the experience more directly and immediately, and see, in fact, how rapidly it changes, and how we grasp things outside ourselves or our self-image, or even that the basic sense of oneself is made out of thought and attachment, and that fundamentally we don't exist as some separate entity, that that's all created out of our rapid thought and attachment. We come to some radical new way of seeing -- that we are not, in fact, separate.

Einstein put it his way:

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us "universe," a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of our consciousness. This delusion is really a prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires, and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of understanding and compassion, to embrace all living creatures in the whole of nature and its beauty.

As we get silent and our awareness gets refined and deeper, when we pay careful attention to it, the sense of separation and solidity breaks down. So this is one of the strengths of doing deep or silent or retreat practice in meditation.

What to do if you actually attain something in meditation? People ask that sometimes. "You should be so lucky," is the first answer. But there is a second one, and the most important one. I remember when I went to my teacher Achaan Chaa after many ventures in meditating in other monasteries and different kinds of practice and experiences and recounted them all to him, feeling kind of pleased with what I learned and how I'd opened, and he just looked at me and said, "Well, do you still have any greed?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Still got fear and anger?" I said, "Yeah." "Still got delusion?" I said, "Ah, ha." He said, "Fine, continue." That was all he said, just "continue."

So what you see is that meditation is not to attain some state of mind -- they don't stay, you can't get them to stay -- but to come to each moment with awareness, with a greater sense of openness of heart, and with a clear seeing.

What can we learn of most value in all of this? When people die, they commonly tend to ask of themselves only a few questions, maybe just one or two. One might be, "Did I learn to live well -- freely, honestly, authentically?" And maybe even more fundamentally than that, "Did I love well?" All the other things that one does have a certain measure of importance, but when it really comes down to it, it is, "Have I loved well?" When somebody says, "Okay, death comes to your left shoulder and taps you and says, "This is your last dance and it's all over," what is your reflection to be? What do you care about? What meditation can open for us in our sitting, and even in the difficulties, is this possibility of learning to be freer in the ups and downs and changes of life and its pleasures and pains, and learning somehow to open and love, to be unafraid to express that love and to feel it in a full way.

One of the most beautiful images for meditation which I've seen was a poster of Swami Satchidananda wearing a little orange loin cloth, his long flowing beard, a very handsome kind of Indian guru figure, who is also a fine teacher. He teaches yoga and meditation. It showed him in the yoga posture standing on one leg, very graceful, only he was balanced on a surfboard on a big wave. It was very impressive. And underneath it said, "You can't stop the waves but you can learn to surf. Meditate with Swami Satchidananda," or something like that. It captures the spirit of meditation practice and the teachings, and how to manifest it or bring it into a world that is full of senses, of sights and sounds and change.

The reason we go through all this trouble and do this strange looking thing, is to somehow live more fully, to see the people that we live with, to see the trees, to be present when we go for a walk in the park and not be thinking about the bills that need to be paid, and what happened yesterday; to live more fully here, to be able to love in a greater way by opening in ourselves all the corners of our minds to that which is difficult and that which is easy. Perhaps because it's our deepest desire to discover our true nature, to come to some sense of our oneness with life or to understand who we are or what all this strange thing that we got born into is about. Basically it's the only game in town, if you look at it; everything else is kind of transitory. It is simply to pay attention and discover what the whole process of life and death are about.

In order to do it, one needs to cultivate or practice mindfulness or awareness, to have it built on or foster some sense of inner stillness so that we can see and listen to all these things. It requires courage. It's not such an easy thing.

Only as a warrior -- says Don Juan -- a spiritual warrior, can one withstand the path of knowledge. A spiritual warrior cannot complain or regret anything. His life is an endless challenge and challenges cannot possibly be good or bad. The basic difference between an ordinary person and a warrior is that a warrior takes everything as a challenge while an ordinary person takes everything as a blessing or a curse.

It's a spirit of taking what comes to us and really working with it. Sometimes you take it as a

challenge, and sometimes you do take it as a blessing or a curse, or you worry about it or complain. You can complain mindfully then, if that's what you want to do. You can learn from that as well as anything else. Let it be simple. The spirit of it is really one of opening, of discovery, of seeing; to sit, to walk, and to train yourself to bring the attention back, concentration, mindful balance, to observe the breath, the body, the feelings, the mind, and all of the movement of what we got ourselves into, and see how one can relate to it at times in ways that cause pain, how one can learn to relate to it with wisdom, with loving-kindness, with a greater sense of understanding and compassion.

It's really not all that complicated. Sometimes it's difficult to do, but it's not all that complicated. Someone once asked Aldous Huxley as he was dying if he could say what he had learned in all of his experience with many spiritual teachers and gurus and much of his own spiritual life, and he said, "It's embarrassing to tell you this, but it seems to come down mostly to just learning to be kinder." To be kind, though, means that you have to be here, you have to be present for what's actually in your experience.