

The Great Vow of Wholeheartedness and Taking Care of Our Stories
Sunday Dharma Talk and Q&A
Green Gulch Farm
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About forty years ago I began to formally practice Zen meditation. I was motivated to do so because I saw it as part of a training program, a training program which comes to fruit, or which I thought came to fruit, in the form of being compassionate to all beings under all circumstances.

I heard and read stories of people who were able to be compassionate in very difficult circumstances, and I thought that I wanted to learn how to be that way. I heard that they went through a training program, and then I heard that the training program was available on this continent. So I came to San Francisco, and a place called Tassajara, to join a community of people who were in this training, in this meditative training course, and to practice under the guidance of a teacher.

I had tried to practice in the middle of the continent by myself, because the training practice can be described as to sit upright, quietly and still. I had tried to practice that way, and I was very successful, but only with big spaces between the successes. I would sit for a while, and then it would be months before I would do it again. So I thought it might be good to be more regular, and I thought if I was with a group and with a teacher, I could be more regular, and could practice perhaps every day.

When I came to Zen Center, the way I thought about the practice was as a practice that I did—with other people, but I thought I had come here because I wanted them to support me doing the practice. And most of my practice friends thought about it that way, too. Our teacher occasionally would give us some indication that this was not the right way to think about it, but generally speaking he was kind to us and let us think that we were practicing by ourselves, if that was what we thought.

Now, at this time in my life, I'm more inspired by and devoted to giving attention to a practice that is not a practice I do by myself. Now I am more interested in a practice, or the practice, that we do together. And when I say "we," I mean all the Zen students, and all the students of Islam, and all the students of Judaism, and all the students of Christianity, and all the students of atheism, and all the mice and owls and mountains and rivers. I mean the practice of all beings throughout the universe. That's the practice that I'm interested in now. That's the practice which I want to plunge into together with everyone. That's the practice that I think is the practice that attracted me in the first place, when I saw these people who could be compassionate. I think these were people who had learned the practice of all beings.

I've heard that a Buddha, or Buddhas, are the practice of Buddhas. Buddhas are the practice of Buddhas, and the practice of Buddhas is the practice of all beings.

So in this hall we gather together frequently and sit quietly together, and it is lovely. As I said, when I first started to come into these Zen halls and sit, I was kind of concerned with what I was doing. I was kind of concerned with the story I had of me, sitting in meditation, sitting in meditation together with other people who were sitting in meditation. Such sitting in meditation is the sitting in meditation of a person who thinks he is sitting in meditation. This is a pretty wholesome thing to do, generally. It is. But that sitting

meditation is not the sitting meditation of the Buddhas. The sitting meditation of the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas is the practice that is the same practice as the person sitting and all beings, and it is the same enlightenment as the person sitting and all beings.

The practice that is the practice of all beings is also the enlightenment of all beings, and it includes all the people—all the Zen students, for example, who are sitting thinking that they are doing Zen meditation by themselves, or that they are trying but not being successful. Even though they are thinking in terms of their own activity, their practice is completely included in the practice of the Buddha. They are not the slightest bit disparaged or excluded.

However, because they think of their practice in limited terms, they are relatively closed to the practice that includes them completely and that is a practice which they are welcome to enter. That is a practice that is already surrounding us and totally supporting us right now, but we may be relatively closed to it if we think of ourselves as practicing separately from anybody.

Again, many Zen students sit next to other Zen students in Zen meditation halls and think of their practice as separate from the person sitting right next to them. So they think of their practice as practicing with a group of Zen students. Many of them think of it that way, just as most people go to the grocery store and think of themselves as shopping in the grocery store with the other shoppers. Do you know what I mean? Do you sometimes go to the marketplace and think, Okay, I'm shopping. I'm in the marketplace with the other shoppers. I'm practicing with a group of shoppers. That's familiar, the practice of me shopping and all the other shoppers. People who think like that are completely included in the practice of all the shoppers. It's not the practice with the group. It's the practice of the group.

So when you come into the meditation hall, you can practice with the other people or you can enter the practice of all the people. The practice of all of us is the practice of the Buddha. It completely includes the people who think I have my practice and you have your practice and we practice together but my practice is not your practice.

And I am not saying that is not true. I am saying that that way of thinking is included in the practice that is the same practice for all of us.

When you are sitting, or walking, or standing, or lying down, the practice is to be wholehearted. To be wholehearted is another way to say this. I cannot be wholehearted by myself. If I think I can do something by myself and I believe that way of thinking, then I am not really being wholehearted.

If I think that way and open to that way of thinking and don't lean into that way of thinking or lean away from that way of thinking, then I also start to open to the practice that is the practice of all beings. I might think I'm giving this talk by myself, for example. The practice of talking by itself is not the practice of all beings, but I might have the story that these words are coming from me, not from all of you. I could think that. Then if I relate to this activity, which is my activity, without leaning into believing that this story of it is really so, and without leaning away from it and rejecting it, and if I'm really gentle with it and honest about it and peaceful with it and open about it, then I also start to open to the practice that I'm doing that is the same practice as all of you.

There is a way of opening to the practice of Buddha. The practice of Buddha is the practice right now, which is the same practice of all beings. Now, how can we open to it?

One way to start is by being honest and saying: Okay, I don't understand that. I think in terms of what I do separate from other beings. I'm honest about that and I'm open to that. I'm open to thinking of my life in terms of my action, which is not other people's action. I'm open to that way of thinking and also a little bit open to what this teacher is talking about. I'm a little bit open to the idea that there is a practice that is the same practice and the same enlightenment for all beings. I'm kind of open to that, too. I'm not really leaning into that, though, and believing it, or seeing that it really is true. I'm just opening to it.

There is a way in which this practice which is the practice of all beings and the enlightenment of all beings is similar to the story that I practice by myself with a little bit of support or no support from you. It's similar in the way of relating to it. In both cases, I should be open to these two different versions of practice. If I wish to realize the practice of all beings and the enlightenment of all beings, then it is appropriate to treat that story the same way I treat the story of the practice of one being and the practice of other beings. Both stories should be related to in the same way if I wish to open to the Buddhist practice. In other words, I should not really lean into either one of them.

Leaning into either one of them puts me, or puts the leaner, back into the story of practicing by herself. Disbelieving either one of them puts me back into the story of practicing by myself. Being rough and cruel to either one of them will put me back into the practice of being by myself. Being dishonest about either one of them or anything about myself puts me back into the limited practice of me by myself.

On the other hand, treating both stories the same opens to both of them. An opening to the story of me practicing by myself, being really tender with the story of me practicing Zen by myself, being really peaceful with the story of me practicing by myself and being honest about it, opens onto the realization of the practice that we are all doing, together.

Being honest that I think that actually my activity is separate from yours, if I do think that, that my life is separate from yours, if I honestly admit that and am tender with that and don't believe that or reject that or avoid that and am peaceful with that, I will see—we will see, we will realize that we are not practicing separately. We will meet the Buddha. We will meet the Buddha, we will meet, we will see, face-to-face, the Buddha.

And what is the Buddha? The Buddha is the practice of Buddha. We will meet the practice of all beings. We will see that we are practicing together with all Republicans and all Democrats. We will see that. If we care for the story that we are not practicing together with George Bush or that we are not practicing together with Hillary Clinton, or that we are practicing together with Hillary Clinton but not with George Bush, or we are practicing together with George Bush but not with whoever, we will see—by being gentle and honest about our story that we are not practicing with someone—we will see that we are practicing with that someone. We will realize that everyone, all beings, human and nonhuman, all beings, are our close friends. We are supporting them. They are like our dear children, and we are like their dear children. We will see this realm.

This is the realm of Buddha's enlightenment. In this realm, all beings are working together harmoniously. It is a realm of existence called the Buddha Way. But we need to be wholehearted with our limited view in which we do not see that everybody is our life. We need to be wholehearted with that. We need to be very tender with the view that not everyone is our close friend. In this realm, nobody really is our best friend. We don't have best friends in the Buddha practice. We just have unlimited close friends. Each one is different, but all are part of the undifferentiated same practice and same enlightenment.

We open to our strengths, and we also open to our weaknesses. We open to our helplessness. Through opening to my helplessness, I open to other people's strengths. By closing to my helplessness, I close to other people's strengths. By closing to my weakness and my helplessness, I close to Buddha's strength, to the inconceivably wonderful strength of Buddha, even though it is extremely powerful, the strength of Buddha, which is the strength of the practice of all of us.

It is not the strength of just one man who lived in India or some Zen masters who lived in China. It is not just their strength. Their strength is the strength of all of us practicing together. That is the tremendously powerful, curative force in this universe.

If I close to my own strength, or to my own weakness, if I close to my helplessness, I close to this beneficence.

If I'm closed to my weakness and I'm closed to my helplessness but I'm not closed to my strength, then I could work with not being closed to my strength. Not being closed to my strength does not mean holding on to my strength. If I see some strength in myself and I hold on to it, I'm not being tender with it. I'm not being upright with it. I'm leaning into it. I'm not being harmonious with it, and I'm not being honest about it. So then I would be looking at my strength and I would be closed to it. Closed to my own strength, I may also be closed to my own weakness. But if I open to my strength, that means I won't grasp my strength. When I don't grasp my strength and don't lean into my strength and am tender with my strength, my strength can change and go away. Then my weakness can appear and I can practice openness with my weakness, and then if I'm open with my weakness, I can open again to my strength. If I can open to my strength and weakness, I can open to your strength and weakness. And if I open to your strength and my weakness, I open to how your weakness is supporting me and your strength is supporting me, and vice versa, and I start to open to the practice of the Buddha.

This is called wholeheartedness. And I can't be wholehearted without your assistance. With your assistance, I will be wholehearted. With your assistance, I am wholehearted. I am already wholehearted. You are already wholehearted. But if we don't practice being wholehearted, then we don't realize it.

In wholeheartedness, I am not trying to get something for myself. I am not trying to gain something from practice. In wholeheartedness, I just want to give. But also in wholeheartedness, I just want to receive. So I am just giving and receiving. I am not gaining anything.

I am not doing anything by myself in wholeheartedness, and I need to practice being wholehearted. I can't practice by myself, so I need to invite you to help me, to please help me, to be wholehearted. You are helping me to be wholehearted already, but in order for me to realize that, I have to invite you. I have to

practice with you to realize that I'm practicing with you. There needs to be the practice in order to realize practice.

I heard a story about the prophet Mohammed. A woman came to him and said that her son was overindulging in figs. Maybe figs were expensive then, because he was bankrupting his family by eating so many figs. The woman said, "He's eating so many figs, I'm practically starving. Would you please talk to him?" And the Prophet said, "Yes. I'll talk to him in five weeks."

Five weeks later he invited the young man to come, and according to the story, he spoke to this young man very tenderly, and said, "You're such a fine young man. I hope you know that your fig practice is really hard on your mother. It would be really good, I think, if you didn't spend so much of your money on figs, so that your mother could have not such a hard time." And I think the young man received these instructions from the Prophet happily and was transformed in a beneficial way through the interaction.

Then after the boy left, some of the Prophet's students said, "Teacher, how come you waited five weeks before you talked to him?" And he said, "Well, actually, I love figs, too. Before I talked to him, I had to look at myself, and my own weakness for figs. I had to get into my weakness for figs, and for five weeks I opened to my weakness to figs so that when I met him, when he came to another person who has a weakness for figs, I was one who knew my own weakness for figs. I was open to my own weakness for figs so I was open to his weakness for figs. I could ask myself, and him too, to cool it on the figs."

Through my weakness, if I am willing to accept my weakness, I can see how great you are. You actually eat fewer figs than I do. But if I don't look at my own weakness, I think, boy, you've got lots of problems. You've got a lot of work to do on yourself. And I can tell you where to go.

For example, there's George Bush. I don't know if this is true, but I heard that he had something to do with giving the Dalai Lama a Congressional Medal of Honor.

Now, I don't know. When I hear about George Bush giving the Dalai Lama a Congressional Medal of Honor, it helps me feel kind of tender, and in my tenderness, I can open to some good qualities in George Bush. In my tenderness, I can open to my own feeling of what a terrible person I could be if I were in the office. So it's nice that this happened.

And when the Dalai Lama received the Medal of Honor, he said, "George Bush is my friend." I heard that the Dalai Lama said that, which is not that surprising to me. What would be surprising to me is if some people I know would say that.

But Buddha has no problem saying, "George Bush is my friend," because Buddha would have no problem saying, "My practice is the same practice as George Bush's practice. George Bush's practice is not some practice separate from mine. I'm doing the same practice and the same enlightenment as George Bush, and he has a practice which is the same practice as me and you."

That's the Buddha. So everyone is Buddha's friend. Everyone is Buddha's good friend. But the hard part is to meet everything wholeheartedly and actually to realize that.

I said it's hard, but it's not really hard, because meeting everything wholeheartedly means meeting every person, every event, every feeling, every emotion, every thought, every experience—meeting every experience together with all beings, receiving all beings' support to meet each being. It means: don't meet anybody without all the Buddhas with you. And you don't, actually, meet anybody without all the Buddhas with you. All the Buddhas are with you all day long.

That's the message from the Buddhas. They say, "We're with you. And not only we are with you, but all the angels are with you, and all the saints." All the Christian saints and the Buddhist saints and the Sufi saints and the Jewish saints, all the saints, all Hindu saints, all the saints, all the Bodhisattvas, all the Buddhas are with us every moment. That's what I've heard from the saints, from the angels, from the Buddhas, from the Bodhisattvas. They say they're all with us. They don't say, "Get those Buddhists out of here." The Sufis don't say, Rumi doesn't say, "Get the bodhisattvas out of here." The bodhisattvas don't say, "Get Rumi out of here. Get Saint Francis out of here."

They don't say that.

The saints are friends with each other, and the bodhisattvas are friends with the saints. Even within Buddhism, we have saints and Bodhisattvas, and they are friends, good friends, close friends. And they are gentle and they are upright. They are balanced. They practice being balanced and upright with everything. They did that long enough that they are open to seeing this realm where everybody is friends, where George Bush and the Dalai Lama are friends. And Hillary Clinton, too.

I heard that Hillary Clinton laughed, and then people started to take pictures of her laughter and people started to attack her for laughing. They brought in laugh experts, and asked them, "What does her laugh mean?" And some of the laugh experts said, "Her laugh is the evil laugh. It's a witch cackle." A Republican leader was interviewed about it, and when they asked him about Hillary's laugh, he said, "I find it very attractive." So he got busted for that and he said, "No, I'd like to retract that statement."

So I don't know. I really don't. But it seems to me that it's really good that Hillary Clinton laughs. I like it that she laughs like that. It isn't somebody else's idea of what a laugh is supposed to be. I would really like all of us to be able to laugh our own true laugh. That's, in fact, really Zen—not sternness, but, you know, weird old guys rolling in the grass laughing. That is what attracted me. No matter what. Maybe they are being kicked in the ribs. Being free to laugh and have it not be a politically correct laugh. Laugh, you know, you're a human being.

But if you laugh, you may get attacked for laughing. That probably will happen. Not every time but most of the time. That's part of the deal.

So again, we have a practice for that. It's called being open to being kicked in the ribs when you're laughing. Open to it. Be upright with it. Don't lean into believing the story "I'm being kicked in the ribs for laughing." Don't lean away from it: "I'm not being kicked in the ribs. This is not happening." Don't try to avoid it. Don't try to control it. Give all that up. Be tender with whatever the story is, and then you'll probably laugh some more, and another story will come. Be tender with it. Be honest with it: "That's my story. People don't like me to laugh, but even though they don't like me to laugh, I'm kind of a weak person, so I probably won't be able to stop myself from laughing more. I'll probably laugh some

more because I'm kind of out of control. I'm kind of helplessly laughing. I'm helplessly crying. I'm helplessly, you know, etc. But everybody's helping me be open and thereby realize that everybody's helping me and I am helping everybody. And this is the practice of the Buddhas."

All right. I also saw that Hillary was wearing some moccasin shoes. They were like shoes that are made in my home state of Minnesota. They're made in Minnetonka, supposedly, like Indian slippers. People were taking pictures of her feet with the moccasins on and teasing her about that.

They're trying to help her become a Buddha. Okay, Hillary, can you open to this? "We're going to tease you for your moccasins now. We're rooting for you." See if you can be gentle and upright, honest and peaceful with these people teasing you about your shoes.

I think it would just be great if the President of the United States could go to Congress with Birkenstocks on, or barefoot.

Did Jesus walk barefoot sometimes? Anyway, apparently he needed his feet washed, right? There was a foot washing practice with him. And the Buddha also, when he came back from begging, his feet got washed.

So I think if it's more comfortable that way, it would be nice if the President could go barefoot, if she wanted to, feeling the support of all of us to go barefoot and laugh in various ways.

A Buddha's practice, Bodhisattva's practice, all beings' practice—Buddha's enlightenment, Bodhisattva's enlightenment, all beings' enlightenment—my body, other bodies, not two. Please allow yourself to be cared for by the whole universe. Please care for the whole universe. Plunge into the great vow of wholeheartedness together with all beings.

Q&A

Is there anything you'd like to discuss?

K: I'm trying to feel my way into how to be wholehearted with my halfheartedness when I don't actually like it.

The first thing that comes to mind is the question how to be upright with my own halfheartedness. Upright doesn't mean you like it and it doesn't mean you don't like it. You've got halfheartedness, but you've also got not liking halfheartedness. So how are you with not liking halfhearted? When you are upright with not liking halfheartedness, you don't like liking and you don't dislike not liking.

Let's say we have a child, or a grandchild, and the grandchild is Halfhearted. We have another grandchild which is Don't Like Halfhearted. We have two grandchildren, two difficult grandchildren, a halfhearted grandchild and a not-liking-halfheartedness grandchild. One is named Halfheartedness and the other is named I Don't Like My Sibling.

As a grandparent you love them both, right? Loving them is not liking them and disliking them. It's loving them. It's being devoted to them. It's not believing their story. You have a child who says, I'm

halfhearted. But the child is not really halfhearted. That's just her story. You're not really halfhearted. You're not. Don't worry. You're not. But you have that story. And if you and I are upright with the story of your halfheartedness, we'll both realize, together, that you were always wholehearted when you were—whatever, say, pouting.

So that's the first thing. That's the upright part.

Then also be tender. Be tender with the halfheartedness, and be tender with I don't like halfheartedness. Be tender with that angry one and that kind of limp grandchild, a limp grandchild and a petulant grandchild. Be tender with both. And, of course, they'll become more halfhearted and more petulant to see if that's real tenderness or a manipulative tenderness, right?

And you keep practicing tender, and keep practicing. Don't kill either one of them. Don't try to control them. Give up trying to control. But be honest. Give them the gifts of "It's painful for me to see you, your halfheartedness. It's painful for me to see you believe you're halfhearted."

You might have a grandchild, and you look at the grandchild and you think what a beautiful person, what a beautiful being, and that being might think, I'm so ugly.

I have a relative, a young relative, who used to think she was ugly. She was totally beautiful, but I didn't argue with her. It was painful to see her believe this story. And it was pretty easy to see that the story was a coping mechanism on her part.

So be peaceful and harmonious, but also try to open to this halfheartedness, really open to it. And if you can't be open and gentle with the halfheartedness, then practice confession: I'm not open with my halfheartedness. I'm not tender with my halfheartedness. I'm not gentle with my halfheartedness. Confess halfheartedness and confess not practicing being upright with it. All that you can confess, and then ask yourself how do you feel about that, and about confessing that? In this process you will find your way. In the practice of confessing your lack of wholeheartedness, you will find wholeheartedness in that practice.

G: I have a question about giving unsolicited grandmotherly advice. My stepdaughter is married to a lovely man and I want to give her helpful advice, but the minute you say helpful, when you're a mother-in-law, you immediately show that it's a very dangerous position, right?

And you want to give her some advice which you think might be helpful. That seems fine. People ask me that kind of question: I have some advice to give to someone. What should I do? I generally suggest asking the other person if she would like something from you. Is your advice a gift? Ask if she would like to receive it. And, also, look into your own heart to see is this really a gift? In other words, if she stomps on it and throws it in the garbage, is that fine with me? Yes? Well, maybe it is a gift. Then you can say, "I have a gift for you."

Do you expect her to receive it when you offer? If you expect, don't give it, but say, "I'm going to offer it," and if she doesn't want it, I'll still offer it. Say, "I have something for you. Would you like me to give it to you?" And she might say, "No. No, thank you."

G: And then that will break my heart.

Yes, probably. So then she gives you that gift. And this is good. Because your heart is forced to be broken, and so then she gives you the gift of a broken heart, which helps you to realize your heart was already broken. Every moment the heart breaks and it comes back together so it can be broken again. The heart bleeds, right? It's a bleeding muscle.

I just went to visit my grandson recently in Los Angeles. We got up early in the morning, and he was eating his bagel for breakfast, and I went over to where he was eating and I said, "Hi." He said, "Hi." And I sat down across from him and looked at him, you know, adoringly. And he kind of frowned, to have this guy, his adoring grandfather, looking at him like that. And then he said, quite civilly, "Would you please stop staring at me?"

I said, "Okay." So then I started looking other places, and I walked away and sat sort of near him but not staring at him. And little by little he had something to say to me. He wanted to ask me something about his cousin, so he said, "Do you think Gabe has difficulty accepting instruction?" I think he was referring to his own instruction to Gabe, because he's seven and his cousin is younger, and he likes to instruct him, but his cousin does not necessarily see him as his teacher.

So this "Would you please stop staring at me?" was a gift to me, which was, you know, a little bit difficult. "Your devotion is annoying, Slave. Get out of here."

"Okay. Thank you."

It broke my heart a little bit, but you know, I'm available for that, and when he wants me, I'm there. I have gifts to give him, and when I give them, I try to give them with no expectation. If I happen to slip into any expectation, that makes it not a gift. And he usually will catch me on that. So it's quite educational.

H: If someone says something to me that I don't like, how do I wholeheartedly express myself without creating conflict?

For example, when my grandson says to me, "Please stop staring at me," if I don't like it, I would say that I'm off balance. I'm an off-balance grandfather if I don't like him saying, "Would you please stop staring at me." If I recognize that I don't like it, I realize I'm off balance, and I see I have some work to do here to get balanced.

When he says, "Please stop staring at me," the story might be that means he's not appreciating me, he doesn't like me, he's afraid of me, he can't stand the intensity of my love. There can be lots of stories about this, right? But there can also be not leaning into any of these stories. This person is hurting you or being cruel to you, doing something you don't like or says something you don't like. The person does say something. And you have a story about what that means. If you lean into the story, you're vulnerable to liking it or disliking it.

When my grandson says, "Please stop staring at me," I have story. If I lean into that story, I'll like it or dislike it. If I notice I like it, I probably leaned. If I notice I dislike it, I probably leaned. So then I have to go back upright. Now I'm upright with him saying something that I had a story about, which I leaned into

and now I'm not leaning into it, and then the dislike drops away. I just have this story, which is not really what's going on. It's just my mind coping with whatever it is in its usual way of making a story about my relationship with this person. So now I'm balanced again. Now we can start over for the next experience.

You also need to be tender with it. Be tender with your anger. Be tender with your off-balancedness. Then you can also be tender with this person you are seeing through your story. You are still tender toward the story and you are tender toward the person, and if you are tender toward your story, you won't fall into the story so easily.

It is possible to be balanced and not tender, but to be both tender and balanced with everything that anybody says to you is the goal. If we can be that way with what people say to us, then the curtain can open and we can see what actually is going on here, which is that we are helping each other. We are good friends, beyond our ideas of good and bad friends.

M: When you say tenderness, the story I get in my mind is to give space to my story about what I'm doing. So my question is how do I give tenderness? Is there another way to give tenderness to my story, other than giving it space?

Yes. Sometimes you might want to touch your story a little bit, or you might want to get the other person to touch your story, if it's a story about somebody. You might invite them to give you feedback on your story. You might say, "I have this story about us."

Tenderness is not just openness. It is responsive, a way of responding, too. Another word for this teaching is gentleness, another is flexibility, another is softness. Being able to move with the story and turn with the story is part of what I mean by being tender, so the spaciousness is there in which you now have room to turn.

So here's my story, but I invite support to come and look at it from another direction, to walk around it, not to turn away from it and not to grab it, but to move with it, to try to be balanced with it and turn with it, to dance with it. In that, there's going to be some potential touching, some contact. We're very sensitive creatures, and even our stories are sensitive creatures, and if I've got a story, I would just like to know how to be with it and interact with it now in a very tender way.

I know this could have an effect, and also if I touch you, it can have an effect on me.

So I might say, "May I touch you?" to my story or to someone I have a story about. "May I touch you?" And they might say, "Uh-huh." And I might not touch the person, but at least I got his permission to touch him. And I won't take that as a carte blanche. I'll check in later. Maybe yesterday the person said, "You can touch me," but that doesn't apply to today.

Sometimes people ask me, "Would you give me feedback if you see me doing whatever?" And I say, "Well, I'll try." But when it comes time and I have some feedback, I have to ask. "Before, you said you wanted some feedback. Do you want some feedback today?" And they might say, "No, I don't, actually. I'm not in the mood."

“Okay.”

“But later I’d like some. Please give me some later.”

“Okay.”

Student: Where does resolution come into the story we tell ourselves with tenderness? How does tenderness help the stories resolve? Or do they?

One way the stories can resolve is they can resolve into a “dew” and pop. Stories are basically cognitive enclosures that our mind makes around us. For example, right now I have a story of you and you have a story of me. And I have a story that I have a story of you and I have a story that you probably have a story of me. I don’t know what your story is. You could tell me. But we do have stories about each other, and they’re little enclosures our mind makes about us, about our relationship. If I care for my story of you, it will resolve itself into a dew. You know, it will melt away. And another may come, and if I care for that one tenderly, that one will melt away too. I will be able to see you and relate to you without the obscuration of my story about you.

I can still have my story about you, but I don’t believe it, so it doesn’t interfere with us. I don’t judge you on the basis of my story about you. That resolves my story, or my story resolves, by dissolving.

But the stories go on, and they have consequence, and the consequences generally are obscuring consequences, obstructing the realization of our close friendship. Our stories currently obstruct our vision of our true close relationship, and they have the consequence of further obstructions to the realization of our close friendship. But we do need to have stories. This is part of the challenge of our life. Our mind is creating things which obstruct our vision of truth. And if we care for the obstructions, they melt away. Part of caring for them is to admit them, to be honest. “I’ve got a story that you don’t like me. I just want to tell you that and invite your feedback on that.”

And you might say, “Yes, I agree. I don’t like you.”

But even so, by interacting with your story, my story still may drop away, even though you kind of agree with my words. And then I see, Oh, this is not true. You agree you don’t like me, but you are actually my close friend anyway. And tomorrow you may like me, and you are still my close friend. You are always my close friend, and you go through various changes, but you are always my close friend. Now I can see that. In this way I open to our real relationship.

You look like you have a story that you’re thinking about something now.

Student: Just processing. As I deal with the stories, or a story, where I feel like I need to have resolution, what allowance is there to have expectation of an outcome?

I recommend that you be gentle with that. Be gentle with the expectation of an outcome. By being gentle with it, you might be able to let go of it.

Having expectation of an outcome is not being upright. I have a story, and part of the story may be, or another story may be, that I have an expectation of an outcome related to this story. Stories that have expectations of an outcome are very dangerous stories. Like giving someone a gift with an expectation, it's not a gift. It's a very dangerous gift.

But I see: Oops, there it is. I'm honest. There's an expectation.

So watch out for that. And don't try to knock the expectation out of the field. Just be upright with it and be gentle with it.

Expectation is a very dangerous grandchild, very dangerous. But if you don't love it—in other words, if you like it or dislike it—you'll fall into it or fall away from it, and then it will start pushing you around.

So when expectation arises, you've got to be really vigilant and tender with it, because if you fight it, it will really get strong, turn into a big, powerful wrathful deity. "You think you can be rough with this expectation? Okay. Well, watch this."

"Nevermind, I'll take this expectation. That's okay. I'll take this one. Don't give me a bigger one."

Does that make sense?

J: In my experience, it seems like stories sometimes help me open to people and understand them more, be closer to them, rather than obscuring the connection. I know we're talking about how stories can be a big problem, and I understand that, but sometimes the stories are really helpful.

Stories can be helpful, yes. For example, if you have a story that somebody is, say, not worthy of your kindness, and somebody tells you another, alternative story about that person, about all the kind things this person does for people, helping people this way and that way, you might change to that story, and given that story, you think, oh, now I feel more open to relate to that person. That new story seems to have made you open to the person a little bit, so that seems to be a helpful story.

Some stories are helpful and some stories are harmful in the short term. Some stories are skillful. In the dharma, we talk about skillful karma and unskillful karma; skillful action, unskillful action, which is skillful stories and unskillful stories. And they both have consequence. There are also stories that are hard to distinguish, where it is hard to see whether the stories are skillful or unskillful.

Skillful stories are generally stories that promote welfare for all beings and also stories which promote welfare for some beings. Skillful stories also promote the opportunity of being aware of the story and studying the story and being upright with the story and being tender with the story. Wholesome stories tend to go with caring for the stories in a way that the stories will open up and you'll meet the Buddha.

So there are wholesome stories and they can be helpful, and the ultimate way they are helpful is in helping us deal with false stories, including that one, such that the story drops away and we see: we dare to relate to each other without grasping the story, without leaning into the story.

Even the Buddha would have a story about you if she met you, but she wouldn't believe it. You could say, "Tell me the story you have about me," and the Buddha could tell you, but the Buddha would say, "But I don't believe that, you know."

And you would feel that. You would feel that the stories running through her mind were not obstructing her actual relationship with you.

J: But what is an actual relationship?

The actual relationship is inconceivable. No story that I have of you or that you have of me or that we have of our relationship, no story embraces, no story can reach our actual relationship, because our actual relationship includes everybody else, too. Everybody is supporting our friendship, and our friendship supports everybody. I can say that, but no story can do that. My story of you is that you are a beautiful, wonderful person, but my story of you is not you.

I also have a story that this is Sunday, but my story that this is Sunday is not Sunday. Sunday is everything going on in the universe right now. My story of it being Sunday is just a little cognitive version of it. So it really is Sunday, but nobody's story of Sunday reaches Sunday. And yet Sunday includes everybody's stories of Sunday.

Our relationship is not what my mind makes of it, but my mind making something of it is part of our relationship. And everybody else's mind, in making whatever they are making, is part of our relationship, too. This way that we are working together is our actual relationship.

C: In thinking about stories and what you're talking about, I can kind of grasp it. It's difficult sometimes without—

You can kind of grasp it, even though you're instructed not to. I'm encouraging you not to, but I'm okay with you grasping it. It's all right. I hope I was tender in pointing that out.

C: What comes to mind when you talk about stories, is that I'm in a work situation where I deal with a person who actually tells a lot of negative stories about other people. Somebody tells negative stories. You have a story about that. And if you can be generous with that story and tender with that story of this person telling negative stories about people and you can be balanced with that story and open to that story and honest about that story, then maybe you can say that: "I have a story that you tell negative stories about people," and maybe you can also say, "But I don't believe it. It's just a story I have. I don't believe it, though." And the person goes, "Wow." The person believes you maybe. It seems true to him that you have this story but you don't believe it. This is a great service to this person.

If you're tender with the person and also you're generous with him, because you gave him your honesty, you gave him your uprightness, and in your uprightness or generosity, you were tender, he can feel that. Plus, he gets the feedback that for some reason or other you have this story. He says, "Wow, where did

that come from, that you would have that story about me?” He can find out more about himself in that way. He can feel your love. Not your like and dislike, because you got over that.

Even if you never talk to this person, he feels that generosity and it transforms him. If this person keeps meeting somebody who sees him, and for some reason you have a story that he tells negative stories, if you keep meeting, your generosity and tenderness will transform him. He will gradually open to that and start looking at his own storytelling in the same way that you look at your story about him. This is the way the practice is transmitted.

Does that make sense?

C: I just had a bolt of clarity. I wish you could write a book about this.

Well, you know, I’m very fortunate because, given my karmic situation, I cannot write books alone. So you and I and many other beings are writing a book about this right now. A book is being written by a lot of people about this topic.

C: A real book?

This discussion you and I are having about this book is being taped. It will probably be transcribed, and it will be in a computer, and you can see it on the computer screen, this conversation that we’re having. People will be looking at that, probably. I may eventually see it myself, but some other people will probably see it before I do. And then they will start editing it. And, who knows, it may even say “Christina” someplace in there.

This conversation we’re having is being recorded, and that story I just told is not the actual recording process. So, for example, I could say it’s not being recorded, but somebody else will say, “Yes, it is. See,” and they can show you that the recorder is recording this talk.

So in this way these talks, these conversations, will be recorded and dealt with and eventually maybe put onto paper. And before they’re on paper, they’ll be electronically imaged on screens. This is going on.

But I’m not writing it. I’m not even talking about it. The talk is happening, and it’s coming out of my mouth, but all of you are making it happen. I wouldn’t be saying this if you hadn’t asked me that question. This is the way books happen in relationship to me. I don’t write them, but they appear.

C: Maybe this would be a nice time to invite people, if they would like to transcribe something—

If you’d like to transcribe this talk, for example, Christina, you could. contact Catherine, and you will be writing this book.

As I say, I’m very fortunate because it’s not my situation that I can write a book. But you can write a book with me and a book can happen through us. A book about us can happen through us. That’s very auspicious. Isn’t that nice? It’s not so nice that I can’t write, but if I could write, then I could write books.

But then fortunately, I cannot fall into that delusion. I'm protected. Whereas some other people who can write, they fall into the delusion they can write, like Catherine.

C: No more.

No more? No more. Okay.

C: What about the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves?

The same. Take care of the story. Step back from it and be upright with it, be gentle with it, be honest. I have this story that I'm a great guy or that I'm right. Or vice versa. I have this story about myself, whatever it is, and I'm kind of believing it. So I heard Reb say that if I'm believing it, I'm not upright.

Upright is I don't believe it; I don't disbelieve it. I see it. I honestly see the story that I'm not a nice guy. I'm not saying it's the truth, but in fact I'm being honest that I have this story. I'm not saying it's the truth. I'm just saying it's a story, and I'm gentle with it and I'm tender with it and I'm peaceful with it. And here comes another one about me, here comes one about Chuck. Now here comes one about Barrett. Now here comes one about Sunday. Story after story after story.

And I, as a bodhisattva, I vow, I promise, to give gracious attention to all these stories that are appearing in my mind. If I can do that, from that practice, I can relate to other people who have stories in their mind. I can show them how to care for their stories, and together we can care for our stories, and together we can live together, monitoring and graciously attending to our stories. And then we can be at peace with each other.

C: So reasonable thought about whether the story is true or not, is not necessarily being upright?

You could honestly have the story that this is a true story.

C: Right. I did something. I did it. There it is. I killed the cat.

And it could be true that you killed the cat. But your story of killing the cat is not the killing of the cat. I'm not denying that you killed the cat. I'm just saying that your story of the event and my story of the event, none of them are the event. The event is much bigger than your cognitive version of it or my cognitive version of it, even though it may be true that this event occurred.

If you lean into your cognitive version of it and I lean into my cognitive version of it, then we're off balance. Then there's going to be more unskillfulness and harm and so on. Then there will be stories about that, and if we lean into those, there will be more harm. But if we're upright about our stories, we have a chance to realize that no matter what's going on, we're doing it together. And it's terrible that this being was harmed, but I'm not blaming somebody else for this, or myself. I'm being responsible together. In that mode, we can realize compassion.

C: Is this an aspect of equanimity?

Equanimity is part of being upright. Equanimity is not liking or disliking, and it is not avoiding liking and disliking. Equanimity is an aspect of love. Equanimity is an aspect of caring for people in a skillful way. To care for beings in a skillful way, we need equanimity.

C: Does it include yourself?

You are one of the beings to care for. I need to care for you, and you need to care for you. The way you care for you is a special thing, because you are the one who knows your own stories. I don't really know them. I hear about them, but when I hear them, I have a story about what I heard. You are the one who is right there, and that is your own job, to watch your stories. My job is to watch mine. And our job is to help each other do that. That way we will realize the truth together.

Student: Are the stories that come up during zazen dealt with differently from the stories we have when we're not sitting?

I would suggest that no matter what posture you're in, you deal with everything the same way. The way I would suggest is the way we call Buddha's zazen. I would suggest you deal with whatever story comes up, in whatever posture you're in, by being open to Buddha's zazen. The way you do that is, no matter what story comes up in sitting posture, and no matter what story comes in up in driving posture, or walking posture, you do the same practice. You open to it, you enter it, you be balanced with it, you be tender with it, you be honest about it, and you harmonize with it. Whether you're sitting, standing, walking, driving, whatever—the same practice.

If you practice that way with whatever story, the story will part, and you will see the practice of the Buddha. You will see the practice of all beings and the enlightenment of all beings, and you will see that it was always there from beginningless time, past, present and future, throughout the universe.

Nate: You speak of not liking or disliking our stories, but in equanimity there is neither liking nor disliking; it includes like and dislike. Do you set an opposite to loving our stories? What is not loving our stories?

Liking and disliking your stories are not exactly opposite, but they are veering away from love. Leaning into like and dislike is veering away from love and equanimity. I think you said, nicely, that equanimity includes like and dislike. It includes pain and pleasure, but it doesn't include lean. It just opens to them: Here comes the dislike. Here comes the pain. Welcome. Here comes the pleasure. Welcome. Here goes the pleasure. Welcome. Here goes the pain. Welcome. Welcome. Welcome life. Welcome life. Welcome enlightenment. If we don't welcome life, if we close to life, we close to enlightenment. So even equanimity is part of the welcoming party to enlightenment.

And it's a tough job to welcome life no matter how it come, to be friends with life no matter how it comes. But that's what attracted me to Zen: people who could say welcome to this and that. No matter what, they would say, "Okay, welcome." Not "I don't like it that you're insulting me and spitting in my face. I don't like it." But I say welcome. And welcome to that, welcome to the buddhas. They're coming

anyway. But if you don't walk among them, you'll miss them. You'll miss. You know, you've got to be home to receive the gift. Welcome.

So this is a very life-affirming version of the Buddha way: Welcome to all life, not liking or disliking, but being tender and flexible and honest with everything that comes. This is the welcoming. At the end of the Heart Sutra it says Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha, which means welcome enlightenment, welcome the world. We are working together with all the buddhas and all the buddhas are working together with all of us. Welcome to that realm.

Is that clear? It is difficult to do it moment after moment. So mostly we say, Oops, I slipped again. I missed an opportunity to welcome life. But then we practice again.

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