

2017_07_30_am2_QA_LMC.mp4

learning to relax, habits and experiencing as fresh

LMC [00:00:22] So for there you for those of you, very few, who maybe today's your first time, often at the end of the meditation here on the morning, we have an open conversation. Which means you can raise questions. You can be critical of us, [laughs] and we will respond [more laughter] to it. We're not looking for agreement, right? An open conversation is good. So if you have questions about the practice, Dharma in general or specific things, whatever it is, generally speaking, there's no particular boundary on the conversation. So far that's worked.

Student 1 [00:01:37] Lama Michael, I have a question about relaxation. [laughter] That's funny, isn't it?

LMC [00:01:52] Yeah. I was wondering why it was funny.

Student 1 [00:01:54] Me too. So, I heard Alan Wallace in a video talk, said... that in his 40 years of giving interviews about meditation, when people come to him with an issue in their meditation, 90 percent of the time it's around the relaxation. And that made me start really thinking about that in my own shamatha practice. And then I started circle around that quite a bit. Like my mind is busy and I actually try all these different techniques to relax. So I just wondered if you could talk a little bit about relaxation as a component of shamatha practice.

LMC [00:02:48] It might be more than a component. It might actually, in one sense, *be* shamatha. And so it just occurs to me when you said, 'I treated it as a component.' It's a great question to ask because we all... I think I have some understanding, at least out of the dictionary, of what relaxation means. So we could just pose the question and see.... what you would say... What is relaxation? Why is it important?

Student 2 [00:03:42] My definition of relaxation in relationship to meditating would be to stop... fighting with what's going on in your mind, but just allow it. Because you can't do anything else anyway. So you might as well stop beating a dead horse and just go ahead and let it be, just turn it loose.

LMC [00:04:11] As Buddhists, we would say, it's better than beating a live horse. [laughter] Okay, let's get serious.

Bill [00:06:24] I want to ask [Student 1], you've now had a moment or two to reflect on the question, since it was your question, it's probably nice if we make sure that maybe it's opening in a way that will be helpful for you. So maybe, now reflecting on the question, how is it that you would you would answer the question of what relaxation is. Or what you think it's not. What the evidence of it not being relaxed is?

Student 1 [00:06:53] Thank you. Well, it seems like it's the opposite of whatever it is that I'm doing. [laughter] You know, I don't actually know what it is, but I can tell you what it isn't. And, you know, it's not what I'm doing. Because when I sit down, I want to *do* something about what's happening. You know, my mind is busy and I want to do something about that. And so... having understood now, that the critical nature of relaxation, uh, what I would really like to know is... in

practice, in the practice of shamatha, what... see, that's it. I want to know what to do. [laughter] Isn't that funny. I just want to say, what do I do about this doing?

Bill [00:07:42] Maybe not add more doing.

Student 1 [00:07:49] I'm Irish, too, I appreciate that

LMC [00:08:01] Yeah. One of the things that I thought to raise this morning but didn't, um, because I usually think about raising 10 things and raise one... was... the way in which... I did mention this, the way in which any practice that we do contains every practice. And so it's helpful, when we're not sure that we're engaging in the practice, to look at it in that way. Like, what am I doing here? And how is this the same as other things and different? The more that we can find the interconnectedness with what we're doing and our practice, the easier it is, I think, to relax.

LMC [00:08:58] So, for example, I mentioned paying attention to physical sensations and mental sensations, which also includes bodily sensations... our angst. So let's take the issue of you would like to be relaxed. And most people would be able to say at least, when I'm relaxed, I know I'm relaxed. But all the other times I don't know what relaxation is. Or how to get there. [laughs] I know that I left that space. And now I don't know what caused it or what brought it about.

[00:09:43] So it's time to experiment, in a way, with that. And one way to do that is to treat *all* of our practices as shamatha. So just as one example. Maybe I'm having... an emotional panic attack. But not so big that I can't see it and not so big that I can't have some kind of a relationship with it. It's like not overwhelming. One of the most effective ways to deal with all of our states of mind is to just gaze at it. You just see it. You just *look* at it. So you can't do that if you haven't first recognized that you're *not* looking at it. [laughs] Right? In other words, I'm just busy and I'm not relaxed. But if you just, in that moment, you're sitting still and you just turn your awareness to the state of non-relaxation, whatever that is, anxiety about something sometimes, so then you just look at the anxiety.

[00:11:03] Our *issue* here that keeps us from doing that... is that we *think* that whatever distracts us, we must apply an antidote. We must fix it. We must get out of that place so that we can... relax. But in the process, we completely lose what that could possibly mean. So one of the ways that, you could call it a trick, but I think it's actually really effective, is to develop the habit of using our shamatha to just place our awareness on whatever the experience is that's occurring, whatever it is. I'd like my experience to be different. So then what do I do? Well, the wanting it to be different has an experiential quality to it also. So if we can find that experiential quality of it, we just place our awareness there and watch it. In which case it's just a fine object of shamatha... you know. It's as good as anything! Even *better*, because in the process, we're also making discoveries about our own mind.

[00:12:22] So when we place our awareness on emptiness... that sort of relies on having already made the discoveries. But when we're just feeling lousy... that one doesn't rely on any kind of insight at all. But it's completely imbued with the potential for insight. We just have to plug in. And the plug-in is... the awareness goes on the feeling, the sensation, the experience, just like you're watching it almost on a movie. So that it can have strong impact emotionally, but we just let it... like the tide, come and go. ... There's one.

Student 3 [00:20:12] Oh, I'm not very good at relaxing at all. So probably I shouldn't say anything. But, um, one thing I've noticed recently is that, um... when I've been able to ask myself, just what has all this frenzied, physical and mental activity done for me? Where has it really gotten me? That, if anything is really helped me relax. [laughter]

LMC [00:20:43] How did that help you relax?

Student 3 [00:20:47] Well, because you see that, you know, especially the mental activity, all this frenzy, worrying and planning and thinking and judging and deciding, and it's a bunch of baloney. I mean, [laughs] it doesn't get me anywhere. It just gets me more tense and more...

LMC [00:21:07] Did you stop?

Student 3 [00:21:08] I can really stop when I notice it! Yes. Yes. Which is not all the time, but when I notice it, yes.

LMC [00:21:16] Then, there you are.

Student 3 [00:21:17] There you are.

LMC [00:21:18] You wouldn't have had that opportunity if you hadn't done all that stuff that came up to that... the experience of it dropping away. There has to be something good about the activity, which wasn't particularly good, but left you in a place where you could, maybe more easily, let go of it because it was too much to hold on to. It's not entirely bad. I mean, it does bring it to a point of having some recognition and maybe some insight into how to reduce it. Just a thought.

Student 4 [00:24:37] Can I ask you, Lama Michael, about habit? You spoke a little disparagingly about habit, and...

LMC [00:24:45] That's because I'm a pro.

Student 4 [00:24:45] I feel like habit is a pillar of my practice. And that's probably why I go down to sit in the morning, is because that's what I do... in the morning. And I wonder, what are the ups and the downs of habit? Because it does seem to be one of our strategies for doing important things.

LMC [00:25:12] Absolutely. ... There's never anything lost by noticing our habits. We might have an aversion reaction to seeing the habit. But the habit itself is not necessarily good or bad. So if I practice every morning, there's a certain way in which I might, not be having great meditation because the habit is there. And the habit isn't just the habit of sitting down. It may be the habit of having the same... thoughts, the same insights, the same whatever it is, that occurs there. And so I may trick myself into thinking that every time I sit down, I have the same experience. So the habit can lead us to that place. We need to have... kind of a trapdoor out of that state.

[00:26:20] There's that line in the Dorje Chang Thung-ma, which at the very end of it, there's the meditator, who is ostensibly the orator in this, says... that every thought is fresh, new, brand new. So... that's not a philosophical statement. It's really meant to be said from the place of, Aha! What I thought was yesterday, what I thought was the same old thing is actually fresh. Nothing in the world of experience, which we all live in, nothing ever comes twice.

[00:27:22] So that's a good thing, I think, to not just to notice, but to ponder. Like, is it really true? Because we have deep habit in saying, I'm having this experience again. I met this person yesterday. Here they are. I'm introducing them. So we're thinking like that's the same person? Really? Most of us, in thinking about it, would say probably not. And thinking about a little more, absolutely not. And when we meet somebody, we often think of *ourselves* as being the same person who met somebody yesterday.

[00:28:03] So it's a really good practice, this is the value of habit... the really good practice is... to notice the practices that we have that can undermine the sense of our life and our experience, just being a repetitious, continuous kind of thing. That nothing new happens. But when we stop and look and see... that actually nothing happens twice, we might, if we look there enough, have an experience of that. Which can feel... intense. The experience that nothing happens twice, ever, including the thought that nothing happens twice, ever. [laughs] It's not the same... because in the interim we have changed. Things have happened. So we have different experiences.

[00:29:02] First of all, we just said, nothing happens ever. So now our mind has had *that* added in, which you didn't have before. So therefore, that thing can never really happen in isolation from what the interconnectedness of what went before. ... It's not complicated. I think that it *feels* complicated because we're so used to identifying this experience that I had before, this food that I ordered in the restaurant, it's the same thing I had yesterday. Of course, it's not the same thing as we had yesterday. Nor is our experience of that food the same as what we had yesterday. Nor is our opinion the same about the restaurant, depending upon what we ate and what happened. But in *big* ways, we notice that. In small ways we tend to... constantly think of ourselves as a repetition machine. Judgments are the same, opinions are the same. We could make a long list of all the same-nesses until we see that actually it isn't so. It actually doesn't occur like that. But when I'm not looking, I have the experience that it's the same. ... I don't know if that addresses your question.

Student 4 [00:30:25] Well, it doesn't. To me, part of the problem is we're creatures of language. We live through our language. And, you know, eggplant is eggplant. And meditation is meditation. And Bill is Bill. And so we're fighting that! Unless we're going to stop living through language, which we're not going to.

LMC [00:30:51] I don't think we have to stop putting [?] through language, but fighting that might be an issue. [laughs]

Student 4 [00:30:56] No relaxation there!

sangha [00:41:53] *dedicating the merit*