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*making a commitment to our practice, **Carrying Practice**: habituating loving kindness and compassion, **Carrying Practice**: habits and how they help us remember the Dharma and bodhicitta, building confidence and self-worth by connecting with others*

LMC [00:00:41] So if you have some... questions or inquiry about your practice... or what we've been mentioning about practice, now's a good time to raise those. One of the benefits of having an open conversation is that... your question, if you're willing to raise it, is then something that everyone can get something from. So if you can, that's helpful... for everyone, then. Oh, yes. And if you are if you have something to say or ask, a microphone will float around in the room automatically. [laughter]

Student 1 [00:01:41] Well, when I heard about this class that was described this morning... What are you looking for, Michael?

LMC [00:01:53] I'm looking for the speaker.

Student 1 [00:01:54] That's me. I never speak. So it's fooling you. Yeah. [laughter] Okay, so there is class you can take... because you see meditation as... an obligation... and... you know, you have to sort of make yourself do it. And I thought, oh, man, I wish they had the *other* class, you know? The class that *I* could go to... cause I think the *rest* of my life feels like that... [laughter] and if I could just meditate. If you'd just let me meditate. But I have to like, figure out where I live and get something to eat. Maybe have some friends or I'm going to be weird. You know, do you have that class? [more laughter]

LMC [00:03:01] I don't know where that class is either. [laughter] You could join a monastery. ... I'm not sure there's a... guarantee even there! I think it's a great question. One of the kind of paradoxes that... we all experience at various times, is that... at some point... the recommendation to make a *commitment* to your practice is on the table. And it's not uncommon for us to *make* that commitment, partly because... we *want* to do it. We know that if we *could* do it, it would be a good thing. And partly because... people are watching. [laughter] Sort of like, you know, you do it because other people are doing it and... making commitments and... doing a certain number of things maybe to make some kind of a commitment. And in my experience... both in terms of experience of others... and experience for myself, is that... just about inevitably, with rare exceptions and there are some... we don't do it as well as we hoped we would do it. And that's a difficult issue.

[00:05:01] So the story that we sometimes like to share about it is, just in terms of getting a sense of... why it's important... why it's difficult... in *this* particular culture, as opposed to other cultures, so my guess is it's difficult everywhere, but... it manifests in slightly different ways. So, some years ago, it's probably 20 years or 15 or something like that... Bokar Rinpoche in India... inspired a fairly good-sized number of people to make commitments to engage in practices... in a kind of order, like... meet this commitment and then do this thing and that, you know about all that.

[00:05:53] I remember we were doing a retreat on Salt Spring Island in Canada, in Vancouver. And there was this one man who was there, who has now passed away, but... was a successful restaurant guy. Had a number of restaurants and all, and I say that only because he was

intelligent, he was a hard worker and he had made the commitment to do certain things. And he approached me during the beginning of the retreat at that time and he said, I don't know that I should be here. I'm not sure that I'm qualified to be here. And I asked him why and he said, "Well, I didn't meet my commitment." Well, the commitment was... to do... ten thousand of a certain practice. That it had a fairly large physical component to do *also*... as part of it. And ten thousand was the amount that he had committed to that we were actually asked to do. And so... he took the commitment... joyfully! And then he says, "I failed to meet the commitment. And so I don't feel like I'm worthy to be here." And when I asked him, well, how many did you do, I expected he might say like five instead of ten thousand or something. Nine thousand and like eight hundred and eighty, something like that. [laughter] Like this... *amazing* thing... that most of us, you would *think* you would just write it off and say good enough. You know? It's not a tax return! [more laughter] So... get on with it. But he was... literally... ready to leave. All I had to say was, "Yeah, that's not so good. Better you go." And he would've just left. And for sure, we never would have seen him again.

[00:07:56] And so that's the trial for us. Is that we almost always wish that we could do more, that we did more practice, that we integrated in our life more, like all of these things... and we almost - never do as good... as we had hoped to do. And the problem with that... is... made clear by looking at how the Tibetans relate to this. Because this is a piece of our problem, is that we measure ourselves by other people's standards. And... my experience with Tibetans has been... you might think that I have a lot of experience with that, but I don't... but the few people that I have had this experience with and that other people have said... a Tibetan can go to this seminar with Bokar Rinpoche, when he was alive, commit to do ten thousand and do... half of that, let's say... and feel *no* guilt whatsoever. And if somebody asked about it, they'd say, I never would have done five thousand if I hadn't made the commitment. Good enough. Next time, maybe I'll do a little better. And it is just like left... there it is. And it's just difficult for most people in our culture... to accept that half way. Halfway. When actually, we can all totally relate to also that... making the commitment... dragged me through a big chunk of something that I wouldn't have done... that I *wanted* to do and so when it's done... I honor the tradition, the whole thing, and let's move on to the next thing! And we're kind of dragging our tails behind us, like I'm not really sure I should be here. Maybe I'm the one person in all of samsara that doesn't have an awakened mind waiting to be woken up. [laughter] Maybe that's why I sleep in, in the mornings, somehow, jeez!

[00:10:20] I think that it's *great* to laugh about it. And yet... it's a real issue. It's a real issue. *Especially* in our highly competitive society. We sometimes get into the place of asking the question... "How many have you done?" Which actually deserves to be, you know, punched in the nose, kind of, like... you know. And that can be helpful! Like... somebody says, I did eight thousand and you did five, and then you might say, well, like how, well, how did you overcome your resistance or whatever it was? It often turns into... a competition. Not always! But... I consider that personally to be the worst outcome. A competition... to be a better meditator, to meditate more hours, to do all these things, are like... "How many good things did you do today?" Ohhh, Five? Five, and I only did two. Ohhhh, thanks a lot.

[00:11:25] And we kind of need to get it out of our system. And at the same time, this is a piece of the puzzle that we have... is that we need to... find a way to engage in the practice... outside of being here together in the shrine room and receiving teachings... and in the moment of something said, we feel inspired. And of course, we hope that the inspiration will just *last* for the rest of our life. And it doesn't. By lunchtime... we can't find it. [laughter] And, and yet the inspiration was authentic. It wasn't like that was phony. So we tend to do *that* to ourselves too. A

real inspiration, you see, would be easy to carry forward. ... I think that we have to find the trick in small ways... that we already do. Something we already do that we can just... add an enhancement to.

[00:12:27] So, for example... I'll use the way that I betray myself, since I have so many examples of that. [laughter] And one of them is... I don't get enough exercise. So when I run... I run down here from where I live. It's only literally a five-minute jog, but I do that five-minute jog. And then I think, you know, I could do... [makes circle motion with hand] twice. That makes it a little longer. That's good! So then I do it twice. And then, of course, I don't do it. Well, that was good. [laughs] Good enough. Okay. Then a week later, I think why don't I do it twice? It's not just about our commitment in the Dharma, it's just generally... how it is.

[00:13:22] I think we hurt ourselves when we make a commitment that we *cannot* keep. And we develop a habit of making a commitment that we *cannot* keep. So for me, I feel like it's better to not make the commitment. The commitment doesn't drive me personally. What drives me personally is a sense of... if I can raise my awareness in the presence of others... and I don't mean in this room, I mean just generally speaking with other people... and to hold the view... of just *intending* to do something positive for every person that we meet. And sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But just to *hold* an intention that we kind of naturally feel okay with. I wish that... these six people, over here, that I don't like... well, actually, I used to like them, but I think they don't like me, so I don't like them back. [laughter] So we get into these things.

[00:14:27] So... there's a lot of antidotes in the dharma where we can, where we can say the issue here is... you believe your own 'nam tok', your own, kind of like, distracted mind. What we say to ourselves becomes this... inherent truth... and we *know* it's not true. We need to start just encouraging ourselves to not... *believe*... what we throw up... as, somehow *that's* the real truth. When what we're encouraged to do everywhere in the Dharma is... treat other people with kindness, with compassion... try to generate joy in their presence, and all these things. We can pick even just *one* of those things and try to do them more. Or all of them at once and try to bring them into every circumstance.

[00:15:20] One way to do that is... you start by saying, okay, now I'm walking out the front door. There's birds on the high wire above the street. And so, you stop for a moment and you look at the birds... and you just give yourself the chance to give rise to the wish... that they *also* are sentient beings... they're not just a piece of dead paper blowing around... they're actually sentient beings and they need to eat and they need to be out of the cold and they need a lot of things in order... to feel some sense of well-being that... I cannot imagine what it is, but I'm sure that it's there. And so we make the wish... that they would be free of that. We move on. Soon as we've done that, make the aspiration... in the next hour, I will do that again. There'll be something. When you go in, you're gonna buy something. So you meet somebody, you try to do something... that is friendly, that feels nice... even just wishing them to have a nice day and even saying something corny, but having a connection with somebody and holding the wish for their goodness. If you could do that once an hour... during the day, even if you only did it eight hours a day, cause we're kind of eight-hours-a-day-people... you might get eight of those in, by the end of the day. And, I can tell you from my *own* experience, if you succeed in eight of those in a day, you feel different... at the end of the day. You feel like... I'm doing it!

[00:17:00] And as soon as you have that sense of self-empowerment... pretty soon you're doing more. Pretty soon you're doing it more often. Pretty soon you don't have to remind yourself. And, like we were talking about earlier... you can *do* that practice for every person that you run

into. At the end of the day... guess who feels better? You actually have no idea how the people are that you met... who are maybe saying behind your back, what a schmuck. It's just like, this person comes in, and says this thing, and I can tell, they don't care. But *you* know, whether you cared or not. And, at the end of the day, even nothing else but just a sense of... I changed.... the nature of my day. My day is different. So tomorrow I will do... the same or something different, and... over time, it will *be* my habit.

[00:18:02] So Buddhists aren't supposed to have habits or they're not supposed to honor them... but actually we all know... that is not true. We are encouraged over and over to have *deep* habits of sitting down and practicing... in order to overcome all the other habits. But *that* habit, if you don't have it, you will not overcome... the causes of suffering. So it's kind of like disposable habits. You know, you can have habits and you know that it's disposable at the other end of the path. You don't need to carry it all the way. ... Okay?

Student 2 [00:18:49] So does that answer the question that was posed at the beginning about don't we ever get to practice for ourselves?

LMC [00:18:59] Who knows.

Student 2 [00:19:00] Because we are. Well, I know that the correct answer is we are practicing... for ourselves *and* others all the time. But to do the practice that you just suggested... at the end of the day, who feels better? You do.

LMC [00:19:17] Yeah. And you feel especially good if you *did* it for others.

Student 2 [00:19:23] Yeah.

LMC [00:19:24] Now, if you do it for yourself, you can still feel good. But... I think it's a little bit tricky here because when we do the aspiration bodhicitta, we're always aspiring to give rise to the awakened mind in order to benefit others. It doesn't say anywhere in there... in order to make yourself feel bad. This is a simple formula, actually. We already know how it is that... our interplay with other people... just our conversations, or the time that we spend together... we know what makes those things... work well and what makes them not work so well. I mean, we're professionals... at it, really! What we're not professionals at... in many cases is, even when we know... what will generate joy for others *and* for ourselves, we, we forget... to do what needs to be done. And then we beat ourselves up.

Student 2 [00:20:35] Yes. Thanks.

LMC [00:20:38] And that's, that's also a problem. It would be better to... just give rise to the understanding.... I'm just like everybody else. So, that kind of levels the playing field, too. I'm like everybody else. We're all forgetting. And when we all forget too much... pretty soon we're fighting. Other things are happening. And then I look at that and I think... we didn't *have* to do that. And everybody would agree. Yeah, we didn't have to do it, but we're doing it so... [mimes a boxing punch] bam! So it's one of the things that, as a community we can do. We can encourage each other... to be kind to each other... no matter *what* the circumstance. ... Okay?

Zopa [00:22:24] It is so true that we... set our direction and then... forget. So... we often talk about that here as habit, you know. Something you said just now is so powerful. Well, we didn't have to fight. We didn't have to go to war, but we did. So pow! You know. And I'm wondering...

from your experience about... the habit... we've talked about the habit that we want to overcome, but... what more about that forgetfulness in the mind. What's your experience of... seeing it, overcoming it? The constant forgetfulness. I wish I'd done it, but I didn't. Somehow it does... weaken. But I don't see how... it does... the forgetfulness weakens. And, you know, I mean, as people practice a long time, then they practice more. But what do you know about that... that thing, that part of the mind, that mental whatever...

LMC [00:23:48] The forgetfulness.

Zopa [00:23:52] Yeah. Both why is it and how do you overcome it?

LMC [00:24:44] It is funny you raise that question, which, of course, is a good question, partly because... we all forget. Those who have the best memory... forget too. ... I have to like, dip into my own experience to see... exactly why that happens... and why it used to happen in different ways... and happens in different ways now. I forget more now than I did 20 years ago. Just generally speaking... [laughs] but I forget less about the Dharma than I ever have. And *that* is... an issue of... habit. So, I don't think of it as habit. And maybe that's because of other training... earlier in my life... that you accomplish things when you have a vision. If you don't have a vision, then it's just kind of like a desire for something this afternoon. Like, I'd like to have split pea soup for lunch. I wouldn't call that a vision. That's just a... pending desire for lunch. And it's a difference.

[00:26:15] The *vision* is... is like the teacher who once told me... every day you should go into the marketplace somewhere, and make somebody happy. And at the time he was saying that because I was saying I don't know how to... build the habit of... just wanting to be... a useful *force*... for goodness. How do you do that? It's easy to give rise to the aspiration in this very moment, like well, of course! And then five minutes later, we're in the restroom. What do you do in the restroom... that is actually benefiting all sentient beings? [laughter]

[00:27:09] And I'm glad you're laughing because there *is* something to do. [more laughing] Definitely something to do. Well, you know, it's from the little to the big... [more laughing] so, you start... when he said... go into the marketplace and make somebody... *feel* good. It's like, I was not the kind of person who walks up to somebody and just talks to them. In fact, it may seem today like it's unlikely, but, I don't think anyone was more of an introvert than me. So the idea of talking to somebody, when I didn't *NEED* to talk to them was sort of like... sticking needles in my body. But I had to do it. So, I believed, when he said to do this, that that was going to be really helpful.

[00:28:14] Now it's so clear... that... the way to hold the *vision*... so, I got to speak from my own side, because this doesn't work for everybody... the way to hold the vision for me is... I remind myself, probably a hundred times every day, about the truth of interdependence. That... I pick up this book and I immediately see it like, huh, there is Chenrezig book sitting right here. And then, then my mind goes, hmm, are we supposed to do Chenrezig today? And then I think, no! That's not right. But I have it in my hand... so I think, due to inter-connectedness... open it. [laughter] You know, take a look. *Well*... interesting. Every time I pick this book up, I see something I didn't see before.

[00:29:16] So we're not supposed to take these things into the bathroom. This is a Tibetan thing, *big* thing. Don't take this into the bathroom and *don't* leave one in the bathroom, if you do! Because one of our Tibetan friends will come in and see it and feel like... somebody does *not*

care about the practice of Chenrezig. So we don't do that. So... actually, I found that to be really useful. Because enough people in the Dharma I see, or they come and see me or I go and see them and... many of them will feel offended if this book is left in the wrong place. So *therefore*... I have something to pay attention to that now is automatic. Now, I don't just leave it around, somewhere. Now I pick it up. So then I think, well, that's actually that's pretty good habit!

[00:30:04] Now I pick it up, every time I pick it up, I have something in my mind that says something like... do you remember *this* piece of the practice? And what I'm really doing is saying... you've forgotten... a little piece in the practice. So then I start to look through it... and half the time... I can find it. And then I read it. Then I'm sort of drawn into reading another page... and pretty soon read the book again.

[00:30:30] So, habits! Every time that you make a habit... to practice the Dharma... to generate something in The Four Immeasurables... loving kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity... so easy to remember! Every time that you... even just *recall* those things, *your mind changes*. Does it not?! I mean, just obviously! You might say, "Well, not much." That's okay! It changes. The more it changes... every time that you see somebody and have an interface... that change... communicates.

[00:31:13] So let's not talk about... high spiritual things. The invisible nature of this and that go together and special days in the year, these things happen more and all... those things don't sing to me. So I don't do it. But I *know*... that if I think to myself... today, I *must* meet somebody. And do something that makes them feel good. So once I had done that... for about two weeks... the experience of it was so... good... I never stopped. I still do it, every day. At least one person. And if the day comes to an end, I make a phone call. [laughter] And... it's always worth at least a laugh. I say, "Thank you. You've helped me fulfill my commitment today." And they'll say, "What was your commitment?" I said, "My commitment was what we just did it." That was it.

[00:32:23] And there is no knowledge... of what it was. But often in the Dharma, there is power in keeping your practice secret. So that... you kind of keep it contained. It doesn't just leak out in small ways and rivulets here and there. Instead, you, you have the thing to do. You do it. And if it benefits... not only *you*, but somebody else... then you're in it! Why would you do something else? Just do it. Just keep doing it.

[00:33:01] So, we sit down and we practice meditation. So, this is the thing... we practice for the benefit of others. So, everyone would *like* to benefit others. Maybe not, but I think in a certain way... everyone would love to be as good as Mother Teresa. And so, it's interesting to ask the question... why is that? And why would you even hold that aspiration? Or anything like that? And I think it's because many people... maybe those of us who have met Mother Teresa, especially... then you think... I wish I could do that. I can't do that but I wish I could do that. But I might be able to do *this*.

[00:33:47] So now you have a, kind of like... you can't quite forget... who that person was that you met... and you can't quite live up to the expectation that you're actually going to do what that person did, which really isn't the point anyway... but you *can* hold the aspiration. And when you hold the aspiration... something changes. Every time you recall it, something changes. It's like another brick, it's another grain of sand in that direction. And little by little... it just becomes... a *habit* of goodness. You just feel like that was really good. *Really* good. Sometimes, when you think... I need to benefit one person today, sometimes the benefit is *much* greater than you imagined.

[00:34:37] And you can't quite do that every day, but... you do something that you can. So you sit down and you meditate and, you know, when you meditate, something happens. Even if you *fail*... even if your mind is like totally distracted and you're carried away.. you *still* have... the wish... to do it to benefit others. There's no need to lose that! No matter how distracted your mind is. You can always hold that. You can always... ask someone... out of that *wish* to be benefiting somebody... how is your day? And then when they answer, add something to it and... it's done. Easy. Corny... perhaps, but helpful... in establishing the habit.

LMC [00:35:40] Okay. How we doing?

Student 3 [00:35:46] If, if one is inclined to be one's own worst critic, even much more so than... what others would perceive... what is the trick, or are there many tricks to overcome that habit?

LMC [00:37:59] Well, I can think of a bunch of things. ... And... knowing you as well as I do, which is... enough... to feel from my side... that you don't deserve to be your own harshest critic. ... I'll guess that if you had... an antidote, a means by which to overcome the self-judgment ... and that means worked a little bit, that you would be able to nurture and master that. ... So it might require a little more of a conversation. At some time, maybe we could sit down... and do exactly that. So I mean, to say that in the mode of inviting it. ... There's nothing particularly special about what you're saying. You know... we are the culture really, of self-judgment. And I think in many spiritual traditions, self-judgment also is even considered a... virtue. In our tradition, that is not a virtue. We need to work on that. Because our aspiration is *wholly* positive. Without that aspiration, of course, then it really doesn't matter... we're not interested in doing something else anyway. But you raise the question because... you're feeling blocked from engaging in the things that you feel would be good to do. Otherwise, you wouldn't say it. ... Yeah, we need... set up a conversation. I can't quite see you because there's a light behind you. Robert, I'm asking... do you agree?

Student 3 [00:41:23] My name is Greg.

LMC [00:41:30] I thought Robert... okay. Robert had talked in the beginning.

Student 3 [00:41:38] When you said you thought you knew me well, I said, "Wow, you're very perceptive." [laughter]

LMC [00:41:44] Yeah, I gotcha. Okay. All right. ... That's only mildly embarrassing. [laughing] ... But actually, I mean, it's the same situation. We have... many of us, and in a certain way... it may apply to the majority of us... we have a lot of support for self-criticism. A lot of support for self-criticism. And often the self-criticism... we learn it... in a way which has no balance. No balance with... building a sense... of confidence and value. Like, I'm a human being. I deserve to be able to do something positive for myself and for others. So maybe in the beginning we try to do it for ourselves. But from the spiritual perspective, we really need to land it on... the value of others. So that we can reflect that. So, it actually takes two. It's difficult to *feel* value... when we're completely outside of... the connection with others.

[00:43:30] It's not just an issue of loneliness. It's really, within the context of the practice, is... so I speak... this is really just from my own experience... the more that I... can give rise to... *feeling* a sense of value for others... the more that I *feel* worthy of that value myself. Again, it's a piece of this thing we call the truth of interdependence. Like, I have a positive... wish for you... and I

hold that. That wish... is like... an elixir. It has its kind of own life, not in some mysterious way like, I wish that... you just *experienced* all of the causes of happiness and well-being and... it was never compromised. Just making that wish doesn't make that happen... in somebody else's stream of consciousness. But... making the wish and holding it changes the wisher. It changes *me*. Then my connection to... you or anybody else... is changed in that way. It sounds... subtle... and it usually is, but it sometimes is not subtle. Sometimes it's quite... revealing... and helpful in ways that... one might not have expected.

[00:45:33] You know, a lot of this is... an issue of getting started. So, what we do with... the practice of calm abiding, we sit down, we have a few instructions, we start to do it, we find it... difficult or easy, whatever it is, and we look for more instruction, more help... to gain more confidence so that the mind can be more stable and we can do more of the meditation that we're trying to do. And along the way... we inevitably *have* to get more help. And generally, what we say is, is that... if you need help and you ask for it, asking for help is like a gift. So, to the person that we ask help from... that is a gift. Because it's an opportunity to manifest... that bodhicitta. And often we can't figure out how to manifest it. What to do, in order to have a sense that we even know what it is.

[00:46:56] So I'll leave it at the same place... sometimes it's helpful to sit down... and just look at each other... and have a conversation... that is not a formula. Simple. Walk around the block or something. ... You have to start somewhere. And starting is often difficult, but often it's the easy part, too. It's kind of like those 10,000 prostrations. The first 10 like... leave you feeling like this is going to be easy. [laughs] And then it just kind of gets more difficult. And sometimes you break through it and it does become easy, but often... it becomes debilitating. And this is where this thing we call sangha, like the community, everybody engaged in this thing together. Not like you meet and do it together necessarily, but in some cases where the meditation has a physical component.... people *do* get together and do that thing together... as a means of support... when we all know... this is difficult.

[00:48:18] And I think that... what you're raising... really, no matter who raises it, I think a lot of what... we experience as troublesome... rests right in the middle of the culture that we're in. And... it's nobody's fault. It's kind of like if you're soaking in cold water, you get cold. So, some warmth... just in terms of... ordinary... relating... like in a conversation or having a cup of tea together... can break something... so that it changes a little bit. And then we have a way to move forward. What do you think?

Student 3 [00:49:10] It's worth a shot. [laughter]

sangha [00:49:34] *dedicating the merit*