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absorption and stillness, continuity and freshness, not beliefs but views and how concepts are only 'proved' with experience, how the meaning and nature of 'distraction' can change, our practice is to bring awareness to experience as it arises

Student 1 [00:01:19] Lama Michael, when we recite the... the refuge prayer, we say "I will now practice the 'absorption' of calm abiding." The word absorption is a very curious word to me. Seems like it has so many... connotations. I think of a paper towel that absorbs water, or things that absorb your attention or, [Lama Michael starts waving a piece of paper] or when you go to another country and you absorb some of their culture. I'm just curious about the use of that term absorption.

LMC [00:02:06] Hmm. I've never been curious about that until this very moment. [laughter] Which doesn't mean I have a ready answer. [laughs] Maybe the meaning of the word contains what it is we're looking at. So, if I look at my understanding of absorption, I see water being spilt on the sink and the water flowing along and then going over the edge. And so I throw something there to absorb the water. And maybe there's some meaning there that could be applicable. When we are distracted, that's kind of like the spilt water that's flowing. And our ability to notice... and since there's really nothing to *do* with it, we call our... attention... let's call it our still... calm abiding... attention as the absorption. So, we are both the thing that absorbs and we are the thing that is absorbed. [laughs]

[00:04:09] We could add one more thing just as an enrichment. We have been for the last few meetings... puzzling ourselves with the proposition that it is utterly impossible to accomplish our own benefit. And from a Buddhist perspective, of course... well, let's take it first from just our ordinary perspective. We come together and we practice meditation. We listen to the instructions. We try to do it and... and we succeed *always* at some level. And we're hoping... to be more calm... in our *abiding*. [laughter] And to be less... plagued with angst and anger and all sorts of what we call the kleshas.

[00:05:27] The problem is that, it's a fundamental thing in every Buddhist tradition, as you know... that the issue really is not... the distractions... or even the anger that we might have or the jealousy or the greed or the pride. All of these things. It's not those *things* that are the problem. It's that we identify with them. *I* am proud. I won't say that I am greedy because that makes people dislike you. But that is included in there... that the *identification* is there! Whether we want it or not, which is often the case, like, if we want to be friends with somebody and then we have an anger fit with them, we lose them as a friend. But that wasn't our intention. Our intention was often to prove that I'm right and you're wrong. And somehow, we thought that that would help the friendship. [laughter] Generally not, but...

[00:06:47] So I think the calm abiding and the absorption in calm abiding, is to absorb ourselves in a way of becoming still. And in the stillness, even if we identify with the stillness like, whoooa, I'm a meditator. In the *stillness*... we see the problem there. Right? And that's the antidote. It isn't anything else than just to see it. Everything comes from the seeing. And that is true... really, from the most fundamental teaching on meditation to the most advanced. It's just seeing, more clearly and more deeply.

Dora [00:07:49] I could just add that typically that word is used for the Sanskrit word samadhi. So if you want to look up samadhi, then you would, could learn some more about it.

Student 2 [00:08:17] The translation for the Sanskrit samadhi is in fact, the 'right absorption'.

LMC [00:08:35] So now that we understand the... *word*... [laughter] can you guess what's next?

Student 3 [00:09:06] Lama Michael.

LMC [00:09:11] So with a microphone, you never know where it's coming from. Could be in South Africa or something. Yes.

Student 3 [00:09:19] I haven't been able to... relate well to the teaching that every single experience is new. And so, that's a *concept* for me. And sometimes I'll try to... fit my experience into that concept. But I wonder, I mean, it really implies a lack of continuity, repeatability. It's pretty radical... concept.

LMC [00:10:05] The lack of continuity?

Student 3 [00:10:06] Mm hmm. So, if I have a cold... and the symptoms of this cold... are the same symptoms... so, they feel like, or I experience them as the same symptoms of the cold I had last year. So, the concept that this is an entirely *new* experience... is an overlay... for me. And I just wonder if you could talk about the benefit of using that idea... to organize our experience.

LMC [00:10:52] So, let's try this on. If it weren't for the fact that every experience we have is fresh, is new, there would be no continuity. I just want to turn it back on the thing. The *continuity* is, in a certain way, the proof that... it's fresh... it's connected. Because we always say... that one of the, I don't want to say the self-evident truth, because I actually don't think any truth is self-evident until you see it. Right? But, it's generally held to be as close to self-evident as you can get. That interdependence is utterly unbounded. There's like, no beginning and no end.

[00:11:51] So this is not... what we generally recognize as our experience of things. It's like, I wake up in the morning and I feel like it's a beginning. I go through the day, and during the day various things, projects or conversations start, come to an end and so on. But, there's an underlying continuity of experience that is unfolding continually during the day. During the day, during the week, during the month, a year. And we would even go so far as to say during our life, leading into future lives and so on.

[00:12:32] But the point here is not that that *truth* is particularly important. So I think *that* is important to understand. That it actually is *not* something to believe. But rather, holding the view and understanding that it is a view... kind of like, in this environment, if you put on pink lenses, for example, everything would change a little bit. But we would understand... we're having a different experience. But... it's not because of anything other than... that we put the glasses on. So, in the same way, when we think that the continuity is continually fresh *by virtue of*... one thing leading to another, to another to another all the time, day and night. It's not a thing to believe. It's more a thing to hold... *as if it were true*.

[00:13:49] Now, I think, in fact... the more advanced stages of realization... perhaps recognize that method in all experiences. Like every view that we hold, the views are really not meant to

be proofs about reality so much, because the only really valuable *proof* about some kind of reality other than the nature of our own minds... is really only valuable insofar as we experience it directly. Otherwise, it's just a concept. And concepts, in terms of the value that they bring to, let's say, spiritual realization and transformation... it's like Mt. Everest and a grain of sand. The concept... is sort of like you want to climb Mount Everest. The first thing you need to do is decide. You need to practice something to work on it. But that's not climbing the mountain. And all of the effort and the experiences that come as you move in that direction... are the important things. So, this is not about the *truth* of interdependence, as if it was... in some way... separate from our own experience. We need, with each one of these things to... recognize the truth that is held in that proposition, that every thought that we have is fresh.

[00:15:40] So... I think that once we see that clearly, we might... suffer from the conclusion of it being an '*objective*' truth. Like a truth that is separate from my own experience. If that is true, it still is useless. We have to have the experience. So outside of that, in the realm of science and in human endeavors in general... we don't feel like we need necessarily to have the experience in order to... gain some benefit from some kind of truth. But in the context of... spiritual development and meditation... the experience itself *is* the primary thing. And we generate those experiences in a number of ways. And one of them is... whether we do it intentionally or not... but we want to do them intentionally... one of them is that we hold views. If we hold the view... intentionally... we are going to see more clearly what it is that we're looking at. If we don't hold it intentionally, then we're likely to find ourselves with some confusion.

[00:17:07] So I think this is simple, actually. I want to have the experience... that every thought that I have... is new. Has never occurred before. Will never occur again. Because it is not an *objective* reality. Experience comes and goes. And if I look at my experience... close, while it's happening, I see the continuous change. Kind of like waves rising and falling on the ocean. So, I would never say, for example, riding in a boat on the ocean, Hey, there's that wave again! We would *never* say that. [laughter] Because we completely understand that... similar causes and conditions gave rise to something that looked like something that was before, but actually it's not.

[00:18:05] So in the same way... just to try on... the experience... of *having* the experience that every thought, every feeling... is brand new. Think of it as things rising on the ocean. It's just kind of like coming and going and coming and going and coming and going. So, there has to be a benefit to this. Because if it's the Dharma, it always has an underlying value in terms of benefit. So, just understanding... that the waves on the ocean function like this, is actually... we might say to each other, "Well, that's *actually* how the waves are." But, the next time that my friend says I don't like you anymore, that view is not so helpful. But, if we understand... experientially... that my feelings of happiness and sadness and angst and relaxation and tension and all these things are constantly just coming and going, we can have a relationship with them that is more... natural.

[00:19:32] But it does not happen without some kind of effort. Because human beings, generally we'll say... that we identify with things which solidifies it... in a certain way. Like, if I like you today, then I like you tomorrow. And therefore, we naturally think it's the same. It's the same. It's the same over and over. So the benefit comes from... not by throwing that away, but rather by recognizing that it is... just in fact, things rising and falling all the time. So, we're not actually trying to *paste* a new face on our face. I mean, except on Halloween. [laughs] But rather, that we're trying to see... how the movement of experience manifests for us. It's non-ending. It's not just during the day or the night. It is 24/7 continuous experiences unfolding. They never stop.

Even we go to sleep, we have dreams. Even we don't remember the dreams, we had the dreams. And we are affected... by what we had even when we don't remember them.

[00:21:03] So, the view itself just sets up... the method by which we... can come to have that experience that... all of our thoughts, our opinions, our ideas... whenever they occur and I recognize them, it is fresh. It has never occurred before. It's like the wave on the ocean. I've been in this place a thousand times on the water in this little passageway, and here is another wave and I've been with hundreds and hundreds of waves. But we would not say those waves are all the same. Or if you *did* say they were all the same. I think you might say... that's a kind of a funny distortion. Where does a wave store itself and then come back and be the thing again? So, this is partly as a practice, you know. Can you remind yourself over and over again the song that I hear over and over that I've come to hate by virtue of not being able to get rid of it is not the same song every day. ... Is that okay? You need more?

Student 3 [00:22:30] No, that's... really very helpful to me. The the idea that holding the view is a benefit in being able to relate to the experience in a natural way... is very, very helpful.

LMC [00:22:50] Yes. And the idea that we cannot accomplish our own benefit is actually only a way in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, of saying that... you accomplish your own benefit by putting your effort and your intention on the benefit of all beings. ... And I think the only proof personally that I have of that, is that every truly great being that I've ever met... seemed to be genuinely happy. And in addition to that, people who were around that person, man or woman, felt like... my life is so much *more* than it was before I knew this person. And so I have the sense that it's true... that with intention, not even necessarily any skillful means, just with the *intention* of using every act and every word that I have, which is very difficult to even have that intention consistently... but by doing it even a small amount, we get a sense of... this is useful. This is valuable. And as time goes by, we gain some skill... in that also. And we recognize this is actually the *way* that you accomplish your own benefit. You have to rely on *all* sentient beings. They are the support for *your* well-being. And if you are the support for their well-being, then the interconnectedness functions.

Student 4 [00:24:53] I'm over here.

LMC [00:24:56] Thank you. Suddenly you're visible.

Student 4 [00:25:00] As we've been speaking about... the inevitability of a change in the freshness, of the newness of each moment... and the experience of continuity.... I am thinking about what's... inevitable, in that continuity will be disrupted. We face disruptions in... every aspect of life. And we have a view of... continuity as something that we can maintain towards reaching the summit or.... safely getting to shore despite the possibility of a rogue wave arising. And I just wonder what the Dharma would have to say about how do we... maintain that goal of... keeping things fresh and continuous when we face disruptions?

LMC [00:26:28] In one of our most famous recitations... a prayer called the Dorje Chang Thungma, the person who mouths that prayer... is ostensibly... making this discovery. That... his thoughts and feelings and ideas and all, like, none of it, none of it is ever repeated. That it's always, it's always something different. It's always new. So, I think that, this is not something for us to *force*... on ourselves. It's really, a matter of making the discovery that... in subtle ways and gross ways... what we thought five minutes ago... even though the precise words that we used to describe that thought are precisely the same in this moment, they're actually *not*. That there

have been changes made in that period and that our... entire experience... is altered every time that there is change.

[00:28:01] So, it's not an issue of the waves... ever being rogue. It's more like, what wave is not a rogue wave? I mean, even if it is... mature. What is a rogue? A rogue is kind of a one-off. So, in a certain way, it just substantiates the thing. We would never say there's that wave again. We just wouldn't say it! And even... we might say, but it's part of our kind of... more than cultural, kind of a *human* thing... we make kind of place holders for things like while we're speaking and understanding and exchanges and all, and that effort that we make, which is *deeply* cultural, as well as, I think, just human... it tends to encourage us to hold the view and to think and to *experience*... you're the same person I met last week, or last month. I can look and I can say well you *look* the same. Therefore, you must *be* the same. We just kind of function like that. And we might even say, well, I think I kind of agree with you, but... if you're saying that everything is fresh, it doesn't sound very *functional* in the world. And with *that*, I would agree wholeheartedly... with a sense of celebration. [laughs] It's a *good* thing. Because... an awful lot of what we call functional... isn't.

[00:29:59] But in this case, I think actually... the function is *actually*, potentially... almost transcendent. But we have to see the continuity. We have to see that every time we open our mouth and say something... it's a rogue... speech. It's never happened before. Because we *are*... learning, growing, maturing. This is not necessarily some high spiritual proposition. It's just that... we learn all the time. A piece of it is that we identify... with things which fundamentally... often stops the learning process. We just come to an end with it. And then we may throw it away. Somebody will say, "I heard this wonderful piece of music." "Yeah, I heard that once too." ... What's the 'it'? I heard 'that thing'. What is 'that thing'? So, what we find great joy in... when we are just present, and not... having the sense, or the conceptual understanding that I'm having this experience again, or I'm meeting this person again and all, but rather... we're having a brand-new experience.

[00:31:35] So, I suppose... what I would recommend... is... in your meditation, when you're just sitting... and things are arising... and you're having the sense that... these things are distractions. They're disrupting my meditation. That's one way to look at it. Another way to look at it is... a *fresh* experience is arising. Put your awareness on it. What does it do? It's like a wave. What waves do? They rise. They disappear. So, your experience is... fresh. It's authentic. You are *having* that experience... so you can put your awareness on it. And, it's actually really easy to put your awareness on it... as long as you have no expectation for how long... that thing will be there. It's not like I put my glasses here and put my awareness on it. The glasses don't disappear. They just stay there. But *I* remain distracted. Why is that? Because we say that... the nature of mind, we sometimes put that technical term on it, the dharmakaya... which is one of the aspects of the nature of mind, it continually... I want to say this, not in a mistaken way... experiences continually flow... from the nature of mind. Continuously! So, that is... a standard, very profound teaching.

[00:33:29] So if it's true, then we might actually make another mistake. Which is ... well then, how am I ever gonna meditate?!? If the experiences continually flow... day and night, all the time, dead or alive. It sounds like... a curse! Like I can never get out of this maelstrom of thoughts and feelings going by. So, this is why this morning I wanted to say we're not talking here about being free of thoughts, free of experiences. *That* is hopeless. So, let us not have a tradition which is hopeless. [laughter] It is not hopeless. We need to... recognize... that that's actually what's happening. When we see that that's what's happening... the meaning and nature

of... distraction... totally changes. What is distraction? If I'm not in charge, or have no way of turning off this continual *experience pump* that just keeps bringing things out... the issue here is difficult because we think... that actually to shut that off is the way to have perfect meditation. But that is not meditation. Meditation... if it's to be of any value, has to... be present in the midst of turmoil.

[00:35:20] So one of the experiences, that flows out of this dharmakaya, is the experience of stillness. That is also there. It's not just... hydrogen bombs going off everywhere. It's *all* experience. Joy, grief, everything! I mean, isn't it true? This is not like some big... surprise, is it? I mean, you sit down and try to meditate and you can't put your mind on the object. That's what you're experiencing. You're experiencing one thing after another coming. This is not a *defect*. If you try to *fix* that defect, you'll just go deeper into the, your disgruntled self... around this thing that you can't get to it, and finally, you'll abandon the tradition and go somewhere else. Where maybe, you'll *get it* or not. But this is not about undoing thinking... definitely not undoing experiences. That's like getting an iron out in the middle of the ocean and trying to like get rid of the waves. It's just that ridiculous.

[00:36:34] So, I think, we need to go into this thing in a way that does not require us to be absolutely still or even to... put that into... the context of the ideal state is... absolutely still. Physically, that only happens when you're dead. ... So, I mean, that's good news. We have a nice state when we're dead. But, but actually we also have experiences when we're alive. All of these things need to be part of our... spiritual practice. Otherwise, what's the point of it? And I just want to say, generally speaking, whether you're a Christian, or a Buddhist, or a Muslim, or whatever it is... is it not the case... that when we sit and meditate or pray, whatever it is, is that not in order to benefit... ourselves and others? ... If we rile against our own experiences, *there's something fishy about it*.

[00:37:48] So, our practice, if we look at it close, is... to bring our awareness to the experience as it arises. And ideally, I don't think... so, I'll just say it like I think it is... is that we are not meant in our *practice*, in our Buddhist tradition, in our meditation... to completely still... our minds. Behind the continuous flow of experiences, the mind may be still. But we are not likely to experience that without significant... realization because, we will pay attention... to the movement. Which is what we generally do in our lives. We do not pay attention to the stillness. When we're still, we think, I've got to do something. I know, I know, I'll watch television. Or, I'll call this person or I'll do something. Stillness feels like... anathema to being human. Like, we just that's just not our thing. And yet we all come together in order to be still.

[00:39:09] So, there's something kind of *funny* about all of it. But it's also, I think, profound. We *want* to be still. I think that's genuine. But when we sit down, we find ourselves wondering, hmm.... haven't we been doing this little too long. [laughter] It's like, it's just... so, it's something to ponder. But, *start*. Go deeper with the meditation by going *into* the experience. Not in the sense of... analyzing it, measuring it, trying to see what a good experience or a bad experience, but just the experiences that arise, just go *into* them... still. And like, I can put this out here [places lid on table]. It's shamatha, I put my awareness on that lid. That's shamatha. But, that's way beginner. Put your awareness on the lid and not be distracted. We would say, that's way beginner.

[00:40:14] But I think even *that's*... not quite right. Because *who cares* whether you put your awareness on the lid. So that's a piece of the problem! We're being asked to still the mind on something... we don't care! Like drum up a big thing about it, the lid. You can't do it. Put a

thousand-dollar bill there and say, if you can rest your awareness for one minute, there's a thousand bucks. But the fact that you put the thousand bucks in it basically assures there's no way you're gonna be able to keep your awareness on it. ... So... *investigate* your own mind... by watching the experiences that come out. You don't need to make any of them. Isn't that true? Haven't we all discovered that? You sit down to meditate, and what do you do? Thinking about lunch. What you did yesterday. Whether or not you can kind of straighten things out with this person, you have a relationship with. All those things, investigate them.

[00:41:19] We have... a plethora of practices... that have very standard steps. First you do this. Well, what do we do first? [pauses and gestures to sangha to answer... off mic answer] Huh? Refuge. Is that what you said? Yes. Refuge. Good start. Good start. We do refuge first. Why do we do refuge first? ... Because we actually cannot be present with our experiences. And so, we get fooled... by the maelstrom of *stuff* going around us all the time. But nonetheless, we go for refuge because... it's an anchor point. I know that I'm attached... to what we call samsara. Which is an odd thing to be attached to because the translation of that is... attachment to all of the confusion and pain in the world. And we are drawn more to go there, than we are to do a long retreat. [laughs] And the way to find that out is... go on a long retreat. [laughter] And you find out like, I hate this! I'm just sitting around and watching my mind! ... Is that not true?

[00:42:50] It's not what we *want* to do. We want insight. But, it's also when you ask that question... you look closely and you'll see experiences unfold from that question. Those experiences are helpful. So, we need to look at the experience and not conceptualize it, not analyze it, just go into the experience. If you go into the experience, no matter what it is... the mind is waging war on one of your old friends, for example. You want to fix it. You can't fix it. But you can fix *yourself*... by looking at the mind and just watching it. Just being with it. It wants to rile and, you know, shoot and do all sorts of things. You just watch. That's hard! We want to fix those things. I want to be liked. I want to be nice to this person and not like this and that. But that doesn't come about by the means that we think it comes about.

[00:44:00] So, back to the beginning. We cannot accomplish our own benefit. If you look at these things carefully, you can see... that we're just not *clear* enough about it. So, we end up *being* the waves that jostle us around. To get on to the clear water, we have to be able to rest our mind... on something. And you can rest your mind on the lid, that's totally okay. It's better than having no rest for the mind. But really... you want to go *deep* into it. You have to rest the mind in the *experience*. Doesn't matter whether you like the experience or not, but if you have an experience of aversion, I don't like that person, that's the gift. You need to rest your mind on the gift. Rest your mind on the aversion for that person. And because it's just like waves on the ocean, the aversion... does not last. We sometimes think, I've had an aversion to that person for years. If you ever looked at it, you'd know... that is not true. You have reinvented the aversion over and over and over again. Because if you stopped reinventing it, it would disappear. It has no life of its own.

[00:45:36] So this is not new. This is not a new approach to things. Though, individually you might find it new. It's actually old. This is where all of the teachings on shamatha go. Through shamatha and into insight practice and into higher realization... they all come down to how you relate to your experiences. And before you can do that, you have to be able to recognize the experience and just be with it.

sangha [00:46:13] dedicating the merit