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placing awareness on experience and the best being experiences we hoped we'd never have, a sense of curiosity is most valuable, the nature of mind is an experience machine and is never still, learning to practice without 'report cards', we really want to bring awareness to awareness, when making a practice 'our own' is it based in bodhicitta?

[00:00:02] omitted discussion of KCC transition

Student 1 [00:07:36] So, I've had this recurring question, and I don't know if I've ever asked it when you've been here, Michael. I think I asked it of Bill once, maybe, but... it's been my experience in the eight or nine years I've been coming here... that when you give instructions about shamatha... they seem to have moved from a lot of sort of focus on the breath, or focus on other objects, to instructions more along the lines of... *place your awareness on experience* or *your experience as it arises*... or something along those lines. And of course, I always have questions about exactly what that practice is supposed to look like or feel like. But I think the easier question is.. why the change... in the instructions?

LMC [00:08:39] Thank you. [laughs] ... So, the first thing I want to say is there's no change. That actually it's the same instruction. So... in order to integrate that, we need to step back just a little ways from it. So... many people have said that when they practice shamatha... they can only go so far with it before the whole thing collapses. Or they find themselves... just unable to extricate themselves from the distraction that they're in. Or some other things in their life that's occurring... and so, it's difficult. Difficult to rest your awareness on a leaf, [holding up bodhi tree leaf] let's say. A glass of water. A little ringer thing. You can put your awareness on anything and practice shamatha... by just doing that.

[00:10:31] The issue there is, well, there really isn't an *issue* with doing that... but the *value* of placing your awareness on your experience is that the experience is almost for sure... more powerful. That is to say... it's not likely that this (holding the leaf) carries some great emotional value, though it might. But it's not likely that it is. Or if you put a little stone in front of you. It's not likely that it... has very much of a charge on it. So, some, as we call it, it doesn't have much power really. And I'm not talking about *mystical* power, just the power of things. So, if you... rest your awareness on your experiences... it's... highly probable that in a fairly short time, you will be resting your awareness on a difficult experience. On an unpleasant experience. Or it could be a very pleasant experience. But... an *unpleasant* experience has a kind of magnetizing quality. That is to say, you don't want it. So... we want to reject it. But actually, then the meditation... is most appropriate in that case to put your awareness on that experience, that *unpleasant* experience.

[00:12:04] I have to quote Kalu Rinpoche again from 1973 when he said... the best thing, the best place to put your awareness... in the practice of calm abiding, is to place your awareness on an experience that you hoped you'd never have. So, in other words, the experience that was really difficult would actually be *easier* to accomplish that calm abiding practice *if*... you place your awareness on something that is really difficult. An experience that is really difficult. So, along the way, the reason there really wasn't a *change*, it was more an issue of... having spent many years talking about... using various objects to put your awareness upon... it just seemed more valuable to use... an experience, which was more intense than the ones that we were using. And then, of course... I can say from my own side, whenever I... change something... I

wait for the feedback. So, usually that takes a few minutes for the feedback to come. [laughs] It's pretty fast. So, the reactions that people had were, by and large, very positive and... motivated by curiosity. Which is interesting.

[00:13:48] I think one of the most valuable things that we can have... in our meditation is a sense of curiosity. Rather than... I like this, so I'll stick with it. This thing I don't like, so I'll figure out a way to not do it. When actually... we just throw away the curiosity element, which is really helpful. Like what do I do if... I'm really angry and I feel *possessed* by it and even I'm going for refuge in it... then what do I do with that? And what a number of people have reported... the most effective thing was to put my awareness *on*... that thing I didn't want. And then the curiosity arose. So, maybe somebody never did that before, and now they did it and they found like, wow! I can get it. I can actually have an experience which... is unpleasant and it becomes pleasant by virtue of just putting my awareness on it and watching it unfold.

[00:14:55] And the other reason for that was, is that... we generally talk about calm abiding... in the context of... resting. Resting our mind. Resting our body. Being still in all ways. But one of the fundamental underpinnings of the entire path is that the mind itself is never still. It just goes! And... I remember one teacher that we had here for a while, I remember talking to him and he says the nature of mind is an experience machine. That was his comment. It just... like pumps out experiences continuously. So... in that context, calm abiding takes on a new meaning, right? You have to deal with it in a different way. If we were doing what we have done many times... is we want to relax the body, relax the mind and enjoy the result of that. And that's a fine approach. But it's also good to have in your bag of tricks, the approach of... I hate the experience I'm having right now. And then we know that actually *that* very experience, the power of that experience can be funneled into... insight. If we put it aside, you don't get that option. So, you have to put your awareness on it and struggle with that a bit.

Student 1 [00:16:43] I don't wanna take up too much time, but that sort of leads to a follow up for me in sort of the experience of working with these different instructions. Because I know... there's a certain kind of peril in getting caught up in meditation yardsticks or measuring sticks. Determining whether it's a success or a failure. And if your instruction or your goal is to sort of focus on the breath coming in through your nostrils, you know, it's easy to measure whether you've been distracted and how focused you were on that or if you had some kind of presence with that experience. But if you're doing something like... when I place my awareness on my *experience*... and that is sort of what I'm trying to do, is have an awareness of experience as it arises. I lose... the yardstick for knowing, like when I'm lost or when I'm actually aware. Because the experiences, they are so myriad and, you know, from the feeling in my toe to... what I'm planning to do this afternoon to, you know, some emotional memory from five years ago. There are a lot of them happening all at once. Anyway, so, I don't know what that's supposed to look like. And maybe there is no answer to that. But it's tricky.

LMC [00:18:43] First of all, I don't think there's a 'supposed to.' And I think that's one of the most difficult things is... *not* to have a 'supposed to.' Because we've trained ourselves to have a 'supposed to'. The 'supposed to' is kind of the report card. And here, in the context of this practice... the only failure, really, is to reject the practice. If you struggle with distraction and find yourself distracted and coming back and then having to do it again and all, that's actually the process. It's not a negative thing. I think, in the beginning, when we hear shamatha instructions, it's very simple and it feels very easy to understand conceptually, but difficult to get it experientially. And yet there really isn't any substitute for that. It has to be experiential in order to really bear the fruit. And so, sometimes we have to give up... our attachment to a clear

understanding. And when we have the sense of disappointment in not getting that clear understanding, then we put our awareness on that sense of disappointment.

[00:20:13] So, I remember once, the great Dilgo Khyentse once said, well, what we *really* want... is to bring our awareness to awareness. We want to put our awareness *on* the awareness. And if you've ever tried that, you probably would agree... that it felt like trying to balance a marble on a marble. It just does not stick. It rolls off right away and you're in another distraction. Something else is going on. So, it's difficult to do. And maybe the real problem with the marble on the marble is that we're attached to the marble sitting still on the marble. And it might be that... the moment we let go of *that*... and rejoice in the failure, we have success. Because it really isn't... a success-failure thing. It's more the determination, the willingness to like pursue it continually. And when you do that, you do notice things... changing the way you relate to things. So, there again, I think that curiosity is not... unimportant. It's really quite important.

[00:21:51] [omitted question for Sally and Jeff and most of their responses]

Jeff [00:44:16] Um, in my experience, when I'm... actually open to the experiences that are happening... the joy is just naturally present. So, really the mechanism is to... put everything aside and just pause for a moment. If I could be in the house and look outside... and just see the outside. And not have all that heaviness. Just look for one beat... everything would lighten. And I tried to encourage that experience as much as I could, which wasn't very much. It's amazing how rarely I actually remember to do that. But it really leavened my practice on the cushion. It allowed the days to go by without so much heaviness. So, that's what I've been doing. And I don't know if that's kosher or not either. So, here we are... out on the edge. But I guess a few years ago or maybe a decade ago or something, I figured out that if I was going to stay on the path, I had to figure out ways to try to make the practice my own. Even if I was *inventing* things like that to try to keep going. So... I guess that's what I've been doing. Actually, Michael, how kosher is that? Inventing things like that? Now that we've confessed we do that.

LMC [00:45:57] I'm not sure I'm the right person to be using the... *kosher*... yardstick. [laughter] Somebody here must have it. ... I like the process... of asking myself whether what I just did... did I do it for me or for somebody else? So, if I did it for me... then, that's pretty normal. That's what we all do. But if I did it, actually with the aspiration and the hope that something positive would come from it, then we're resting on... a foundation of the Dharma. So, that's pretty easy to do when we do something positive for someone, it's often... let's say... mixed with 'self-things'. Self-aggrandizement, and I want to get this. And I hope I'll have this and I hope I don't have this sickness and all these things. That's often mixed in, maybe almost always mixed in. Right?

[00:47:37] But with some *intention*, we can interrupt it. And have with whatever we're doing, a sense of the *wish* that whatever I'm doing... that it will benefit all sentient beings. Or even it's just one person you know who's having a really hard time... that you could make the wish that what I'm doing right now will benefit that person. That will resolve their grief or whatever it is that they're experiencing that is unpleasant. It changes the thing that we're doing and it changes our relationship to it.

[00:48:18] I don't know if that means kosher or not. I think it's a big piece. You know, we've many times said in the last few months, that... I like the phrase and I don't know where I first heard it... "*It's not possible for us to accomplish our own benefit.*" And in the moment that we hear that, it seems counterintuitive. Like, well, of course, it's possible! Maybe I went to school. I got a degree. I got a nice job. I made a lot of money. It's like all this. And we have a sense of

well I am accomplishing my own benefit. But we're talking about a different benefit. And that benefit is... insight, that both Jeff and Sally mentioned. The... comfort with meditation and the things that we do. And it's natural for us to sit down and meditate because we want to be still. We want to be at peace with ourselves and at peace with others and all.

[00:49:23] But... there is often a statement that... 'I've been trying that from a long time, many years, and it's not working. I don't feel like I'm getting more peaceful. I don't feel like I'm having less kind of disagreeable things to deal with. I feel like there's more of them.' And we get discouraged. And that discouragement... is a real curse. It really undermines... what we know is really valuable. And I don't know another way to deal with that, except to... put our attention on whatever it is that we're doing... over and over during every day to just make the aspiration that whatever I'm doing right this moment will benefit all sentient beings. I don't care about my benefit.

[00:50:25] So, we often have this sense of... it sounds almost like... 'Gosh, I'm surprised. I didn't actually think I was in a tradition of being a martyr.' That's what it feels like sometimes when we say you need to... place all of your awareness on the benefit of others. Sounds like you want to ask the question, 'What about me? Don't I get *anything* out of this at all?' And the answer is, it comes from the place that you don't expect to get it. Which is... your wish that what you are doing benefits others. Regardless of what it does for one's self.

[00:51:16] I mean, really, that *is* the practice of saints. Whether it's in the Buddhist tradition, the Catholic tradition, the Jewish tradition, whatever it is, I think... that is the practice of genuine saints. Is that they live and work for the benefit of others. And I think that it's not lost on us when we meet someone who is of that genre, it's not lost on us that they appear to be... more or less continuously joyful. Even under the most trying situations.

LMC [00:52:18] [umdze sounds bell] Oh, good. [laughter]

sangha [00:52:32] *dedicating the merit*