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In one sense of the word, we are practicing all of the time. We practice, consciously or otherwise, because everything we do or say is a reinforcement of that aspect of our nature or of our being, and the more we do or say something in a particular way, the more it becomes what we do or say. In this sense, we are always practicing, often not consciously. Over the course of years, we set up patterns that become *our patterns*, or the ways in which people *recognize* us, other than visually. I think this is an important sense of the word *practice*, because it brings into view the true underlying concept. Ancient teaching states: "Behind will stands desire." Therefore, our actions are, at some level, willed, in line with a desire, conscious, or otherwise. When we speak in certain ways, we are, in fact, practicing speaking in those ways. Indeed, if we look back over our lives finding that we speak in certain ways in certain kinds of situations, we will find that the reason why we do so is because we have practiced those patterns repeatedly. Thus we automatically respond using the familiar pattern when in certain kinds of situations.

Philosopher John Locke originated the notion "Tabula Rasa," which literally means *blank slate*. He contended that when we are born, we come into this world as a blank slate. Moreover, Locke believed that everything one becomes is a product of one's sense – experience and we are but a product of impressions, and patterns of impressions: conditioning, in a word. However, it might be said that some of the things humans have become good at by practice may have been brought from past lives. These things may not be traceable through activities in this particular life. For example one may ponder, *How did I get this (trait, thought, etc.)? I don't recall doing any practicing to end up here.* That particular skill or manner could be something carried over from a previous life. It is helpful to extend the notion of practice to what we are doing all of the time, even though it may not be mindful. Buddha taught: "All that one is, is a product of what one has thought." So, one could say that *all that we are*, is a product of what we have practiced because thought is a form of practice. Most people think all the time. Some of us cannot stop thinking. Others know how to take *thinking breaks*, but even then thinking often continues in certain automatic ways. All of us have our patterns of

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thinking, and those patterns are the result of having so practiced thinking on a recurring basis.

Looking at practice in the above manner can make the concept a little more conscious and a little more existential. *Gee, I'm practicing right now, I'm in a traffic jam and I'm all uptight and angry, so right now I'm practicing being uptight and angry.* One could be practicing patience instead. If one gets the notion that just about everything he or she is doing is practicing something, then one can practice different ways of responding to the external and internal thought patterns. Therefore, if one does not like what is being practiced, and if it is noticed what one is doing, the thought comes: *I'm practicing this?* Realizing that this response could be of a different nature, one can choose a more helpful practice. Sometimes practicing patient acceptance is appropriate and also easier on the nervous system.

Let us connect the idea of practice to the questions one could ask oneself during the course of a typical day: *What am I practicing? Am I practicing being irritated because I have to be at work? A lot of people engage in this negative practice. I'm at work and I don't want to be. I'm going to be here, but I'll resent it.* That is a practice. The more such things are practiced, the easier being negative becomes. Most people have negative and destructive practices. However, people would be happy more of the time if they did not have these negative practices (or what my Teacher called "negative meditations"). Moreover, some of us practice things like "catastrophizing relative to the future." For example: *Today's okay, but the future will be worse.* This type of practice involves projecting some horrible occurrence into the future: *It's going to be pretty bad, pretty darn gruesome, and therefore I get to be unhappy today because of that thing I'm projecting out there into the future, which is bleak.* If one thinks like this, then one is practicing being unhappy today, using the future as a means to be negative or feeling sorry for one's self. These are all very simple psychological processes in which people engage. However, these negative practices are not innocent because one is choosing to be unhappy even if unconsciously. Such practices can pertain both to the future and to the past. So why are humans not happy most of the time? Because many have developed

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these particular and mostly negative mental practices even though these modes of thinking prevent happiness. Others make some *trip* with the past: some remembered trauma telling us we don't deserve to be happy for whatever reason playing in our minds. When people practice rehearsing something negative from the past, it causes the action of making for unhappiness today. Many people practice blaming their unhappiness on other people. That is another common negative meditation. Buddha said: "We are the product of what we have thought." It can equally be said we are the product of our practices.

There is a case for regularly taking some time, to look at our practices — our daily typical ones, asking such questions as: *On a typical day, how does my head work? How does my fantasy life work? How does my time continuum work? Where do I spend most of my time in a typical day? How much of my time is spent being mentally in the present? Or, how much of my time is spent where my body is? How much of my consciousness is located in the same place as my body?* Asking such questions will reveal *telling* and helpful discoveries about some of the practices in which we are engaged. This enables one to gradually discern between healthy and unhealthy practices. The Dalai Lama says repeatedly: "All human beings want to be happy." A similar concept is in our Constitution: "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." If all human beings want to be happy, if that is our deepest want, and we are engaged in practices that are not getting us there, or are not getting us there very consistently, then it is probably worth taking a look at the practices that are not accomplishing this. Like Abraham Lincoln said, "I figure people can be about as happy as they want to be." If all human beings desire happiness, it is really quite incredible the extent to which most people go to avoid it. Most people are happy when *things are going their way*. The road is straight; there's no curve. A friend once said, "Only a short road has no curves." He is a sixty-year-old man, highly educated, and quite wise. He has a daily planner, keeps very busy, his planner being filled in months in advance. He keeps his mind in the present only "in today." He said, "Only a short road has no curves, and I don't know if I'm going to make any of these appointments in my planner; I don't even know if I'm going to be alive. So I just keep it to today." Thus saying this he truly practices staying in the present.

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This is a good practice. Try going through a whole day staying *in the day*. When your mind goes forward or backward, just bring it right back to wherever you are, no matter how humble or mundane your current *place* or *state* may be. I used to teach young students in my philosophy classes to occasionally take a "philosophy field trip." One of my favorite ones was for the student to just sit down in a chair in his or her house, preferably when no one else was around with no external distractions to see how long one could actually stand his or her own company, thinking no internal nor external thoughts. For most it is not very long before some thought arises. We then need to practice bringing our mind back into the present. To be sure, it is a difficult experiment when first attempted. Most will discover negative meditations that prevent one from doing authentic positive practices.

Another worthwhile positive practice is to be silent for a whole day. This may require the cooperation of others who have been informed about your day of silence. If you need to communicate use paper and pencil: no verbalization. This would be a day that includes other human beings, not merely spending the day alone.

The teaching that "all that we are" is a result of what we have practiced thinking gives hope that happiness can be attained. This brings us to the idea of positivity: *What could I do, what sorts of things could I practice to help me be happier, maybe a little kinder, more compassionate towards others?* To move in this direction, some type of practice is necessary. One can pick something, such as patience or loving-kindness. Choose whatever you would like to move toward, whatever you find ennobling; then start practicing it. Practice doing it, avoiding self-loathing if the thoughts come that *I'm not doing this right, I'm a failure at this thing*. Continue practicing...try, try, ever try. Just start acting nice, even though you don't feel that way, even though you feel like a huge hypocrite. Act nice, and if you stay at it by practicing acting nice, pretty soon you'll be a nice person. Then, you won't be acting anymore; you won't be faking anymore. Such self-chosen practices can lead to a greater understanding of Krishna's teaching: "Realization comes from dwelling upon that which is to be realized." Krishna's notion of dwelling upon something is a profound example of practicing.

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Nothing is set in concrete about who we are, or what we are even if our past practices have led to unhappiness. As stated earlier, the trick about practice, in its generalized sense, is... doing it. One can study all the books about how to live a human life, or how to be spiritual, or how to find God, the One, Cosmic Spirit, or Krishna or Allah or whoever I'm calling it. One can read types of self-help books and can know them cold, tell all about them and still not be a happy person. All this can be done to no avail if not put into practice. Practice is more important than what often, alas, passes for knowing. There's an old Hindu story about a man named Drom, a Sage from long ago.

Someone asked him, "Is belief good? Is it good to have beliefs?" Drom replied, "Yes, it is good to have beliefs, but practice is better."

The man asked, "Is it good to know things?" Drom answered, "Yes, it is good to know things, but practice is better."

Then the man asked, "Is it good to meditate?" "Yes, it is good to meditate, but practice is better," said Drom.

As we see, the answer to the questions seemingly about wisdom was, "Yes, having beliefs, knowledge, and doing meditation are all good things to do, but practice is better."

This discussion is operating on the assumption, that practice is better than reading, being a scholar and having an incredible belief system. All these things are valuable on some level, but they don't take us on the journey to happiness. The only way to overcome the results of our negative practices is to inculcate some positive ones. And, the only stopping block there is the attitude: *Why should I?* The task is getting down to it.

But how, when, do we actually get down to it? A goal could be to get to the point, when in the "damn traffic jam," to actually practice being patient. Or, when

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talking to some person we have difficulty understanding, we can practice being magnanimous, instead of becoming disturbed. Lao Tzu says, “When a good student hears about the idea of practicing, he immediately starts doing it. When a mediocre student hears about this, he considers it, thinks about it a little bit, but may or may not ever get to the practice part. When the inferior student hears about the idea of practice, he just laughs. If the true nature of practice was not what it is, it would not be capable of being laughed at.”

If you are, for example, usually kind of a “bitch on wheels” at work, and all of a sudden you're being nice, someone could say, "What's with you?" You could reply, “Oh, I'm practicing being nice.” Others may think you are weird, but that's okay, because, you are practicing being nice. *You know, I've been kind of unpleasant the last fifteen years here at work you know, I'm turning over a new leaf. So, I'm practicing being nice.* Another might say accusingly, “You're not sincere.” You reply, "Perhaps not, but I'm doing the best I can and know how-at present." Re-inverting our practices begins in the thinking. Our minds are where this endeavor has to start. To alter one's practices, patterns, and thinking is very difficult indeed. The difficulty arises because of what Plato called *Akrasia* (weakness of will). Most of us have struggled with this type of difficulty, with regard to the will: "Yeah, it would be nice to practice whatever, but I just don't have the time (read: will) to do it. I can't get up for it. Or, I'll do it for two or three days, and then I'll kind of forget that's what I was trying to do." Does this ring a bell for the reader?

Yes, practice is a nice notion, but its positive implementation requires will. And Plato says that the main infection most of us have is weakness of will. He is talking about the kind of will that is directed towards positive self-change, towards increasing *light*. It is very difficult to mobilize this kind of will without the required desire. Without the will, only the idea of practice is there. It might be a good idea, but the idea will not assume a form. It may begin to take form then die out relatively quickly. In order to have any kind of self-change that is going to amount to more than fantasy, a sustained will to route out an on-going practice is needed. To reiterate, the practice one wishes to begin to change, can be a small physical or mental activity. Pick some small

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thing and try it. But to keep “going on” requires a very strong desire to do so. The desire to change more deeply embedded practices, will meet with resistance from other aspects of one’s nature which will require even greater strength and continuity of will to overcome. Such deeply embedded practices have their seat in the mind. Thus, overcoming negative practices requires the cooperation of one’s mind, which in itself, is a product of practice. For many of us, practice begins through some level of understanding: Dostoevsky’s statement, “Suffering is the Great Teacher.”

Pain is usually the touchstone of progress. There are those who are self-motivated; who do not require the sensation of pain (or who need a lesser degree of it) to spur them to change. I’ve met some people consciously practicing who are affecting change in themselves, and sometimes influencing others accordingly. How do they get the will to stay at it? They keep working at it. For them, it’s no big deal, not a big dramatic thing. To use a personal example, many years ago a man told me that what I have to do is practice staying present today. That statement got my attention: “Oh, really?” He said, “What you have to do is practice staying present TODAY. Just stay present today.” This he told me years ago. At the time I heard his words of wisdom, but I did not get it because I already thought I was present...*today*. Since that time, I have come to see that much of the time I wasn’t *present today*. My body was present in the present; enough of me was present to handle the interaction required, if any. But I wasn’t really there...most of *me* was off here, part of me was off there, part of me was thinking about something else, part of me was planning tomorrow, part of me was wondering about the last time I interacted with this person. I wasn’t all there. So, I started practicing being present today. You know, it sounds kind of dumb, because we are all *present* today, in the common sense of the word. But, in the deeper meaning of the word, in reference to our level of consciousness, we are often not present. It is a matter of degree.

Greek philosopher Heraclitus stated, “For most human beings it can be said, though they be present, they are absent.” That’s 500 B.C. talking...about the average person. Though they be present, they are absent. I realized this was true of me. That is why this man told me, “Try staying present today; you’re absent half the time — you are

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kind of missing in action here." If you want to know how present you are today, see how much of today you remember. The blank spots are when you were not present. Your body was present, and your *mechanical interaction* may have been happening. But if you can't remember many of the details of your day, that is because you were not *there* in the present. If you were *there*, you would remember more of what occurred: Oh yeah, then this happened, then they said this, and I said this. So I realized that it was very difficult to stay present. As it turned out, being present was sometimes not very much fun: You actually want me to be present? There are all these vibes, there are all these horrible things going on; you actually want me to be fully present in all of this, rather than just space out? The answer is: "Yes." Practice being present, then you can take the next step, which is to practice being present while being in full acceptance of what is going on. You can take everything as it is, neither liking nor disliking what is occurring. You can practice thinking: This is it! I'm present, and this is what is going on — knowing, deep down, that you do not realize what is going on, remembering what was stated earlier, practice the action enough and the transformation pattern will eventually happen.

Then, there is the kind of practice that would involve knowing what to do in this *present state* where this is going on; that leads us to ethics that ask questions such as: What to do? What to practice? In answering these questions brings up words like virtue. The virtues can be practiced; that is the only way a person would ever move towards virtue (any virtue) is by practicing. For example, there is the virtue of patience. It is practicable. All the virtues are practicable. But the aspects of us that are practicing the anti-virtues are going to resist the parts of us that want to practice the true virtues: "Ah, forget it. You don't want to do that. You don't want to be nice to that person, you know how they treated you the last time you saw them. You don't want to be nice to them and ask, 'Hi, how you doing?'"

I think practice is very difficult — being extremely easy to talk about, but very difficult to put a resolution into practice. One could say that right now I am *practicing* giving a talk; I don't know if it *makes perfect*, but it makes better. One learns different things, and tries different things. Some of you are practicing listening. Listening is a

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good example of putting a resolution into practice because it is so easy for the listener to tune out. If I tell you some things of which you are already aware, you may be “tuning out” as it is often difficult to remain fixed in our attention when we are hearing something we think we already *know*. What we consider to be our *knowledge* often weakens our capacity for attaining more refined levels of listening and therefore deeper levels of awareness. Throughout the day, one can practice by completely taking oneself out of the equation. Just listen...totally. You might be amazed at what you hear, at what people are telling you with a new sense of clarity. Often, people say perhaps much more than even they are aware. One may receive these deeper levels of meaning with practice.

Next, I would like to speak to spiritual practices. I think life itself is inseparable from the spiritual aspect. I don't make a distinction between a spiritual aspect and a non-spiritual aspect, nor do some religions in their beginnings. All is spiritual, in the deepest sense of the word. There is only spirit. To put it in terms of physics, the entire universe is all *Light*, and permutations of it. There is nothing else. There are meditations that are purely spiritually focused practices. There are different kinds of chanting that people do. There are many kinds of prayer in which people engage. These are examples of different types of practices. There are many more. All practices are difficult to stay with, for many. Most Teachers suggest that if you are going to adopt some kind of practice to do everyday, do it at the same time every day if possible, and in the same place every day, so that your personality, which is the thing that needs the practice, comes to expect anticipate what is going to happen at that time of the day, in that place, everyday. One can resolve to engage in a more direct, focused, and sustained spiritual practice (about ten minutes): *Okay, every morning at six I am going to sit in this chair and think about God, or meditate on something beneficial.* The focal point of your meditation is whatever you decide might help you be happier, more compassionate, and more in a state of loving-kindness. If one persists in one's practice, the time will come when the aspects of us, which resisted become our helpers. One is creating a good habit. Those resistant aspects have developed the expectation that this is what is going to happen at six in the morning, for a certain length of time. However, merely because you regularly practice this, doesn't

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mean that everything will be *hunky dory* during the practice. There may be all kinds of battles going on while you are trying to do it. But just keep at it, and do the best you can. Don't beat yourself up if you do not have some cosmic consciousness experience right away, or ever. Just keep sitting there, trying to meditate on something, thinking about something other than yourself, and your life. All spiritual practices have one thing in common: they do not involve thinking about oneself. True meditation involves some noble idea, such as love, compassion, or Light. For example, think about light for ten minutes every day the aspects of light such as the sun, and what the sun does, and how it works. Simply think light. See what happens. You have engaged in what Gandhi called “an experiment with truth.”

The same man who said, "It's a short road that has no curves" also said, "Enlightenment is just more spiritual Light." He said that to me, "Enlightenment is just more spiritual Light." So, how do you do this? By dwelling upon it. I like to think about the sun, as a symbol, as something not physical, but a far deeper source of Invisible Light. For example, the Light in our minds is not coming from the physical sun. I think about this internal light of awareness or consciousness as coming from a source. There is a source because there is light. Without the *internal reality* of light, we would not be able to consciously realize an idea as it arises. One has to *see* the idea that takes form in the mind; so there has to be a light, which allows us to see what is there. It may be said that Light is connected to the process of seeing, which in turn is related to realization.

One could meditate upon light and the sun. The striking thing about the sun is that it is 100% giving. It gives everything, receives nothing — not a bad model, or motto, for a human being — receiving nothing, giving everything. Another thing about the sun is that it shines on everybody. It doesn't make judgments about whom it is going to shine upon. With that conception, one can begin to deconstruct the idea of an anthropomorphic God who is going to be nice to some people and mean to other people. One can move past that belief when visualizing the sun because the sun gives to everybody. It is our own chosen thoughts, feelings, and actions, both externally and internally, that cut us off from the Light, or God, or the sun. But yet, the sun radiates

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equally towards us all. The sun shone on Hitler, on Mother Theresa, on Gandhi. Light from the sun is universal.

These remarks bring us to the point of realizing that if a person were serious about authentically practicing, they would greatly benefit from finding a Teacher. It does not have to be an embodied one. It could be Buddha, Jesus, or any of the Great Teachers to whom one may be attracted. Then, having chosen, one could just read, study, and think about what they taught, and try to practice some aspect of the Teaching. Thus, one would constitute oneself as a student of that Teacher, even though they are allegedly long gone, *e.g.*, Krishna, Buddha, Rama, Jesus; Mohammed. One can make one's self a student of one of these Teachers. If "I" am not this body, this brain, this feeling nature, then neither are they. They didn't die any more then we are going to die. Indeed, to constitute oneself as a student of the Buddha is possible because whatever was still is. What passed away was a body, revealing almost nothing of their true identity.

Thus, one can find a Teacher, especially if any of the classical ones appeal. Their teachings are safe to practice; they are time-honored. The original teachings are there, easily accessed. Anyone can study them and seek to put them into practice. Or, one might find a living human being who one thinks might be a suitable teacher. All one has to do is ask, and they will either say "yes" or "no," or, something altogether different, perhaps. A true Teacher will teach you what you need to know, or show you what you need to practice. Real Teachers do not have a specific teaching for everybody. They might have some general principles for everybody. But a real Teacher might have a different teaching for each of his or her pupils. This is because each pupil is in a different state of consciousness, developed to different degrees. Also, each pupil has different problems, and different negative practices to overcome. I was once speaking with a well-known tennis coach. He coached several famous tennis players. He said the hardest people to coach, even though they have talent galore, are those who have already developed some bad playing practices. They are the hardest to coach because they have to undo all that they wrongly learned before they can start learning how to do it correctly. An incarnate Teacher will see your miss-practices and aim the teaching to

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what is needed to overcome them. He or She will also recommend practices, which will help to create new and more beneficial causes. These latter, if motives were altruistic, will aid both you and others.

For me, initially, it was tough. Practice *is* tough, but it is always worthwhile. Practice can produce a great result, albeit the result may not be immediately noticeable or particularly profound. The actual results might not show themselves for some time. If we remember that we are working with vibrations and forces, then practicing is tuning ourselves to vibrations that are more conducive to our happiness and the happiness of others.

As the years have passed what I have found in continuing my various practices, is that I am less willing to be unhappy; I take action by starting a practice I have learned. As time goes by, if one continues to practice, one will begin being deeply happy more of the time. Occurrences of being unhappy may not altogether disappear, but the time spans will between them get shorter before one applies a remedy. However, one does not know what the remedy is unless one has already sought to apply it: I am going here, and there is something I can do about it. One of the things we can do about it is to “negate the negation.”

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