

THE EXAMINED MIND
A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton
All Souls, New York City
October 1, 2023

About a month ago, early in September, early in the morning, I was coming back from the park with my two dogs. All three of us were cheerful. It was a beautiful morning, and I saw my neighbor's family of five in front of our building. Someone was taking a photo of the two parents and three little girls. They looked very put together. Their hair was combed, and they were all ready for school. The oldest girl was holding a sign that said "Grace's first day of fourth grade."

They weren't smug. They were just sweet. They looked grateful for each other, and they were commemorating this special moment in their family's life.

And when I saw them what occurred to me is... I'm a terrible mother. My mind immediately went to me, comparing myself and my family to them. I don't think I took a single photo of my children on their first day of school and I had 46 opportunities. I missed them all. I have very few family photos, and this brings up for me sadness and loss and aging. And the passing years and inadequacy.

It makes my mind go to the past and think about all the moments I didn't capture or commemorate because I was focused on scrambling to get someone's shoes on. My mind goes to the future when I think about how I won't have all these sweet photo albums when I have time to look through them.

These feelings can make me miserable. And at the time, I wanted them to go away. I even felt the impulse to make this excuse: I practice mindfulness so I'm present, and I don't get the camera out because I'm really present. But the excuse is insincere, I simply don't get the camera out.

This is where my meditation practice comes in. In meditation, I watch my mind. I'm trained mostly in the Tibetan Buddhist practices of meditation,

but all of the teachings of Buddhist meditation are about this in one way or another. The Tibetan word for meditation is gom, which means to become familiar with.

When I meditate, I can observe this self critical voice. I can see my wish to make excuses so that I no longer feel inferior to my neighbor family. Thanks to meditation, I have a pretty good idea of how my mind works with respect to jealousy and other difficult emotions.

Viktor Frankl, the late Austrian psychotherapist and Holocaust survivor wrote, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

I respect the sadness that arose for me and the inadequacy and the sense of aging and loss. They come from a vulnerable place. The stimulus of the family posing for the photo, made me wish for more memories and photos of happy times. But that stimulus is followed by “a space” that I've cultivated in my meditation practice. The space allows me to see my mind's proclivity to get sucked into self criticism and sorrow.

And I am faced with a decision. How do I want to respond instead of allowing my mind to go wherever it's inclined? Wherever our minds are inclined, those are our habits. So if we have habits of self criticism, of worry about loss and aging, that's where our minds will go.

Mindfulness is the practice of experiencing that space between the stimulus and the response. Mindfulness is awareness that comes through paying attention in the present, on purpose, without judgment, in the service of self understanding and wisdom.

So the space allows me to consider how I want to speak or think, or act or go on about my day after what has happened. The alternative is to let feelings dictate how I speak, act or think. By seeing the space I free myself from being stuck in that misery. Because getting stuck is not only hard for me, it's going to reverberate from me out into the world as well. It's corrosive.

I felt sad, I felt upset with myself, and then I thought, “that's okay, that's how I feel.” And the result is that I drive this tiny wedge into my habit of self criticism, into my habit of going to that place. And if I keep inserting

that tiny wedge of space, my habits are going to shift. I'll find a more peaceful mind. The next time I see that family, I can appreciate their happiness. I can actually see them instead of seeing my own inadequacies.

In the book *Real Happiness: The Power of Meditation* American Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg explains all these unexamined assumptions that are going through our head that we don't see:

“We have nothing in common. I won't be able to do it.

You can't reason with a person like that. Tomorrow is going to be exactly like today.

If I just try hard enough, I'll be able to control him or her or them or it.

Only big risks can make me feel alive.

I've blown it. I'll just give up.

I know what she's going to say. So actually, I don't really need to listen.

Happiness is for other people. It's not for me.”

I'm a terrible mother, friend, daughter, person.

When we take time to watch our minds, we detect these assumptions and we can begin to find the space to shift our habits. A couple of the benefits of meditation that Salzberg outlines in her book include how it can help us weather hard times and how it enables us to recapture our energy.

We weather hard times better because we practice sitting still with our difficulties. We feel sad, and we know it's okay. We practice just letting them be. She writes “In small manageable increments we make friends with the feelings that once terrified us. Then we say to ourselves: ‘I’ve managed to face some of my most despairing thoughts and my most exuberantly hopeful ones without judging them [shoving them away or placing responsibility for them on someone else]. That took strength. What else can I tackle?’” We see that we're stronger than we thought.

Another benefit of meditation is that we recapture the energy we've been wasting, trying to control the uncontrollable. Our feelings arise, and they

will be what they will be. We can't control them. We can only control that space.

Sadness arises for me about not having cherished the important moments over the past few years. When we see this in meditation, we see that our emotions happen this way. We see that other people can't be controlled. We see that situations come up and trigger us. This can lead to understanding of ourselves and others, and we develop healthier boundaries and relationships. We adjust our expectations. We develop patience with ourselves and we see that our difficult feelings are everybody's difficult feelings.

In meditation, we come back to the breath or to the voice of the person guiding it. We come back over and over. Our minds drift and seeing our minds drifting, this is how we become familiar with ourselves. We hear "tomorrow will be exactly like today. If I just try hard enough. I've blown it." We see the habits that form our lens on the world.

I often hear people say "I'd love to meditate but my mind is too cluttered and it's too busy. My thoughts are racing. It looks great. But I can't do it. There's no way." It's true for me too. And what I've learned over the years of leading meditation programs is it's true for most of us.

I heard a woman say once that her nascent meditation practice was like being trapped in an elevator with Woody Allen.

It's a myth that meditation is a blank mind. Tibetan Buddhist teacher Lama Yeshe in his book titled *When the Chocolate Runs Out* writes "In meditation, the goal is not to suppress thoughts and desires; this is impossible. It would be like trying to keep a pot of water from boiling by pressing down tightly on the lid. The only sensible approach is to train ourselves to observe our thoughts without following them. When we stop following our thoughts once we notice them; we deprive them of their compulsive energy; this is like removing the pot of boiling water from the stove."

It is a question of how we approach our thoughts in meditation. And we can learn from our thoughts as we observe them.

There are other myths about meditation. It's a myth that you have to sit in full lotus in a perfect posture on the floor. Be comfortable in meditation, we meditate with the body that we have, not the body that we think we're supposed to have.

It's a myth that it has to be quiet when we meditate. In fact, for most of us in New York City, it's impossible to find quiet and the truth is that the sounds can help us develop our practice. Back in the days when we had our Monday soup kitchen dinner inside and we'd invite our guests in for dinner, Harry Miller and I would lead meditation for the guests. We would go through the line and invite them to come downstairs to breathe for a little while to find some peace. We did this in the Minot Simons Room which is downstairs right next to the kitchen. It was extremely loud. All of our wonderful volunteers were making dinner for everybody, for hundreds of guests.

There were people passing through the hallway. And we would say to the guests, do not go to the sounds when you hear them, let them come to you and observe them. We hoped that for our guests, whose lives can be very chaotic and noisy, that they would find some peace in that. Certainly, it helps all of us.

It's also a myth that you have to meditate for a long time every day. My practice started with a four minute timer. I don't know why four minutes-- that seemed manageable. It turned out it was the longest four minutes of my day for a while. And that was when I did it. I had to force myself, I had a lot of resistance. But I had faith. I knew that it was going to make a difference.

Perhaps the biggest myth in meditation is that it's something you have to figure out by yourself and that you do by yourself. This is not the case; we need support. The great spiritual leaders all tell us we need teachers and we need community to develop our spiritual practice.

I have many teachers. One of them was the teacher I found when I first started my four minute practice. I was doing my clinical work as a chaplain at Memorial Sloan Kettering. My assigned floor was like many hospital floors, quite busy. There was a lot of suffering, a lot of pain, a lot of difficulty for the staff and for the patients. The nurse manager on that floor was like the person Thich Nhat Hanh describes in the Vietnamese refugee

boat in the prayer this morning. This nurse was the calm that projected out through the entire floor—to the patients, to the staff, to me. It was amazing how his presence made such a huge difference. I asked him how he did it. And he said that he meditated twice a day, every single day.

I have another teacher, Stefan Pende, who I speak with regularly about my own meditation practice. He helps me shape it, understand it, free myself within it, and grow. I once said to him, “I've memorized this list of prayers.” (This is something we do in the Tibetan practice.) I continued, “I think it's time to memorize a new prayer. Which one do you think I should memorize next?” He replied, “Your practice is so crowded with prayers, you really want another one?” No, I really didn't. I thought I was supposed to have another one. So just in that interaction, he freed me of self imposed constraints on my meditation.

We all need guides. And I want to especially emphasize that if you have a history of trauma, or mental illness, that you find a teacher who guides you with meditation, who is trauma informed.

We also need community in meditation, we benefit from meditating together. It may seem weird that we need to be around others when we meditate since we're looking inward, but there's a sense of goodness we share and a lifting that comes from that when we meditate together.

Over the past three plus years since we started a lot of the online programming at all souls. I've been doing two sessions a week where we meditate and talk about various things. 50 to 80 of us gather twice a week. We meditate together and then we share stories. Some stories are about how a meditation practice can change relationships, can change work, or how it can help with managing loss, illness, caregiving.

When I first started exploring the possibility of creating what is now called Buddhism and Mindfulness at All Souls, I had a vision but I did not have the courage. I consulted a beloved teacher and asked for her guidance. She told me she thought I would be fine with the provision that I kept up my own meditation practice. I objected further saying “but I get sleepy and my mind wanders so much and I can't stay with my breath and I don't really know enough about Buddhism. I'm not ready.”

She responded, “How do you know?”...

Elizabeth Baranowski writes in her poem from our reading this morning,

‘Your room with its walls cannot help you,

And your half-finished dream

Is a boat too big for the doorway.

Take up your name, and swim.”

I am committed to you and your spiritual growth however you choose to pursue it. I hope the programs here can help you experience the freedom that can result in becoming familiar with your own mind. My commitment to my own spiritual growth is fueled by you--by your stories, your support, your curiosity. You inspire me. Thank you.