

November 22, 2022 Tuesday Evening, Living Awake Class

You Have Permission; The Ox Herding Pictures; Taming the Ox; Guided Goldfish Meditation

Aaron: My blessings and love to you all. I am Aaron. (*Adjusts sound volume*) Barbara gets mildly irritated with all the different controls she must observe in order to get the best sound for the recording and for you. I stop her and remind her, “Look how amazing this is that you’re able to speak to people all over the world, sitting here at your desk. And that there is adequate sound. Perhaps you need not begrudge it a minute of your time to adjust the controls. Why do you need to do that?”

What it comes down to for Barbara is all of the things she must do—the balls she is juggling, in her terminology—and that the sound becomes one more ball.

If you’re juggling balls, and each of them is a stick of dynamite that will explode and kill people if you drop it, then there’s going to be tension. If you’re juggling balls, and if one is dropped, it’s dropped; when somebody notices and waves and says, “Hey, that ball fell,” okay, pick it up. It’s okay. Give yourself permission to juggle balls and to drop balls.

I want to find a poem I think we’ve perhaps read in this class, but I want to read it again. (*Pause as Aaron looks for it on the computer*) A ball that does not wish to be juggled... I’m looking for the poem “You have Permission”, and it doesn’t seem to be allowing me to open it. I’m going to try one more time, and if I can’t find it we’ll drop that for now... Okay, we found it...

This is a poem by Dan Nussbaum. And I think it’s important to tonight’s class, remembering not to strive to get everything just right. To relax in your practice. To relax in your life.

You Have Permission

by Dan Nussbaum

You have permission to do the meditation practice you’ve been doing all along. You have permission to believe in it or question it or enjoy it or let it take you where it takes you. You have permission to be bored. [And yes, you have permission to be bored when I am speaking.] How else will you ever get to the bottom of boredom? You have permission to try something else.

You have permission to think. You have permission to worry. You have permission to wonder if you’re doing it right.

You have permission to wonder what doing it right means. You have permission to see yourself wondering. Did you start meditation to become a good meditator? You have permission to do it wrong. But if you have permission to do it wrong, how can you do it wrong? You have permission to be bad.

You have permission to remember what it was like to be carefree. You have permission to doubt those memories. You have permission to get back to those memories whether you made them up or not. You have permission to know how you make up memories.

You have permission to go over German verbs. You have permission to think about the different grades of motor oil. You have permission to wonder, How is this meditation? You have permission to note body sensations. You have permission to do something else with body sensations. Love them. Be suspicious of them. Forbid them. Give them meaning. Question that meaning.

You have permission to have feelings. You have permission to need someone, to worry out of habit, to fear vaguely, to feel disgust, to insist on getting things your way. You have permission to let things go on. You have permission to find yourself in unexpected mind states.

You have permission to get lost. You have permission to be curious and interested. You have permission to get transfixed. You have permission to feel calm. You have permission to feel sleepy. You have permission to sleep. How else will you know about waking up if you don't have permission to be asleep?

You have permission to know yourself in meditation.

You have permission. You have permission. You have permission.

So, we have permission to be present with pleasant experience, with unpleasant experience, with joy and sorrow, with love and let's not call it hatred, but even that, strong anger, strong aversion. This is the experience of the human, everything arising out of conditions and passing away.

As we speak of the Ox Herding Pictures and follow that path, by now in our class we've caught up to the ox. We're tracking him. We're walking right beside him. Maybe have grabbed hold of him. Maybe he is rubbing his nose against you kind of affectionately. Maybe he's kicking his hooves at you, wanting to get away.

If we reflect on the ox at least in part as representing the mind, the mundane mind and the awakened mind, how do we catch and tame that ox? How do we bring him home?

We cannot tame the ox if we demand the ox walk quietly by our side, never swerving to grab a mouthful of grass, only doing exactly what we believe he should do.

The ox, he is going to go everywhere—grab some grass, kick at another ox who's getting too close, rub his face against you to scratch an itch.

You cannot tame the ox with a whip. You can only tend to the ox with attention and love. Loving kindness, and yes, love.

Until he is tame, that is, at ease within you, you cannot bring him home. In other words, until he is tame so that that awakened mind is accessible to you, you cannot live from that pure mind.

The awakened mind actually is always there; it is you who make it inaccessible by your fear of it.

“What if I really am that? What if I am loving? What if I am immense, clear, radiant? And what if I cannot enact that all the time? Do I give myself permission not to enact it?”

So, when a mind state like anger or strong desire, impatience or some similar state comes up, if you're not willing to give yourself permission to experience that state, how can you learn about freedom from entrapment within that state?

Opening your heart to things as they are, and with love, you begin to see both the darkness and the light, the anger, and the love, the one who is asleep and the one who is awake.

It begins with giving yourself permission to experience mind, body, and all just as they are.

You don't have to enact it just because you experience it. If there's anger, you don't have to rush off beating somebody with a stick.

What is the direct experience of anger from the perspective of awareness? What is the direct experience of sadness from that same perspective? And what is the perspective from the mundane self?

We see the big picture, how this or that mind or body state arose out of conditions and passes away, leaving what in its wake?

I'm going to lead you in a very brief guided meditation just to give you a place for reflection, and then we'll come back and talk more.

I would ask you to be a goldfish in a fishbowl. It's a big bowl. When I say 'big' I don't mean ten feet across, but three feet across, and it's shaped so it comes up, rounded, and then it flares out at the top. There is a shelf around the top, anything jumping out of the bowl will land on the shelf and gradually slide back in.

The other fish in the bowl are no danger to you. You're all about the same size. There is abundant food. Within that bowl there are a few living plants that rise right up to the surface, and there's some kind of a castle with door and window openings through which you can swim, which you have done a million times.

You swim round and round and back and forth. Several times a day, food flakes appear on the surface of the water. There is enough for everyone, so you go up and get some food. You don't really know where it comes from, only that you see a little bit of darkness over the bowl and then these flakes falling on the water.

And so, you eat, and you swim, and you nibble a bit on the plants, and you swim through the doors and the windows. You swim past the many brothers and sisters in the bowl, around and around and around.

One day you think, "Is this all there is to life? This fishbowl, this is the world. Is there anything else? The food comes from somewhere. There must be something beyond the fishbowl."

You make the decision, when you see that shadow that says food is going to drop, to get your nose right up to the surface. You break through the surface as the food is

falling and you see something immense out there dropping the food. “There is something beyond the fishbowl. What is it?”

You gather your courage and you practice jumping, until one day, as the feeding time arrives, you jump up out of the bowl and onto the shelf. And you lie there. “Oh!” Above, you see something that looks like endless water. You don’t know the word ‘sky’, but there above you is this vast blueness. And here is something a thousand times bigger than a fish, dropping food.

Needing air, you jump back into the bowl. You swim around. What was it? There is something beyond the fishbowl. There is another whole reality.

You practice until you can hold your breath much longer, jumping out of the bowl onto that shelf and looking around. You see that there are many different sizes of beings in the place beyond the fishbowl. There are many vivid colors. You don’t understand any of it, but you start to understand, “There is a bigger reality than my fishbowl. The only thing that stops me from living that reality is my inability to hold my breath for any length of time.”

So, you practice until you can go for ten minutes without strain. You develop hearing and seeing, getting to know the world beyond the fishbowl, until you are absolutely certain that the fishbowl is just one bit of a larger reality.

You begin to ask yourself, “What would it be like to live my life from the perspective beyond the fishbowl? What might I accomplish? What might I be able to give in the world?” And gradually you develop that ability.

One day, when you’re lying on that slope at the top of the fishbowl and the being comes in with food, you begin to flop your tail, but not in an agitated way. Just looking directly into that being’s eyes and flopping your tail a bit, wiggling yourself.

And he looks at you in wonder. “Are you talking to me?” Flop, flop, flop. “But you’re a fish!” Flop, flop, flop. “It seems to me you are aware of me, Mr. Fish.” Flop, flop, flop, and wiggling with a happy expression on your face. And you begin to communicate with this external being.

You are a fish, so you are going to have to jump back in the fishbowl. But now you have ascertained that there is both the mundane reality of the fishbowl and the larger reality that you don’t yet understand.

This human says, “Who are you, Fish?” You jump back into the bowl, swim around. Jump back out, flop your tail again. You’re doing your best to communicate. “Are you trying to talk to me?” Jump back in, swim around, jump back out, flop, flop, flop. Smile, yes.

Who is swimming in the fishbowl? In what way am I entrapped by believing there is only the fishbowl?

So now, in this lifetime you are human. You are living in a different kind of fishbowl, in a mundane mind that believes only in what it can tell through its senses.

It does not give itself permission to experience in any extrasensory way. It does not give itself permission to trust its loving heart or its feelings of connection with other beings, to pick up thoughts and so forth.

But gradually you, as the human in this human fishbowl, may make the decision to think outside the bowl, to live in this larger space.

Who am I? Why am I here?

You begin to ask yourself, What blocks me from living in that larger space? And probably the core answer will be old belief in limitation.

And what does that belief get me? It gives me a sense of control, perhaps. When I am afraid, I want to be small so I am more in control.

What if I give up these old beliefs, move beyond them? Start to know exactly who and what I am? What if I wake up?

The fish within the bowl is pretty safe. The fish that leaps out of that water onto the shelf is not so safe there.

To tame the ox asks of you that you leap out of the bowl. That you get to know this mind that has worked so hard to live within limitations so as to stay safe and to keep others safe, or so it believes is necessary.

What if you are willing to move into that expanded space of your true being?

So many of you now in your meditation have had moments of catching the ox. You've really caught up with him, maybe even have hooked the rope around his neck and said, "Come home with me." He resists, of course, but you've gone that far.

This mind, this so powerful and radiant mind, can soar through the universe.

This mind that is caught up in the outflow of conditions and obedience to those conditions cannot soar.

It's not enough to catch the ox. What tames the ox?

To tame the ox means to know the ox. As the poem said, "How will you ever know about waking up, if you never give yourself permission to sleep?"

How will you ever know the liberated mind unless you give yourself permission to look at that which holds you into the mundane mind?

We're back where we were last semester, looking at path of sacred darkness, but hopefully, for most of you, having taken it a step further. Through your practice, having tasted more, let's just call it freedom, spaciousness, and joy. A firmer knowing that you are not just this mundane body and mind.

Stepping outside the bowl, the fish up on the shelf, looking at his friends swimming in circles around the bowl. Looking at the beings in the vast world beyond the bowl and knowing, "I am more than just one who circles within the bowl."

And these vast beings that I see, a hundred and more times my size, they are circling their own bowl. Where is freedom?

There comes a point where you can say, "I choose freedom! I am shifting into knowing myself as the one who is awake. I choose freedom."

What blocks me from living that freedom?

Many of you have had deep meditation experiences of dissolution of body and ego. And then you slip back into self-identification as being the body and the ego.

Get up off that shelf, my dear fish! Stand up on your fins, walk around the bowl. Put on, if you need it, some breathing apparatus, just as a diver would wear underwater, so that the fish wears some air-breathing apparatus and gets up out of the bowl. Go off and explore the universe!

What if you are not limited in any way? What if you are awake?

What blocks you from knowing yourself as awake?

In asking that question we tame the ox. Only then can we bring him home, begin to live from that awakened state.

I'm going to pause any formal talk here and just open it to questions before John comes in to do meditation practice with you.

If no questions, feel free just to share. What was your experience in that fishbowl and climbing up on the shelf? Would anyone like to share that?

John: I'm wondering, if the power of the awakened heart mind is so great, then why is it that we become more confined to the conceptual mind? If the awakened mind is so vast and powerful, why is it we become so identified with the aggregates and limited more to the mundane existence? It would seem that the awakened heart mind is so vast and so

great that it would supersede the mundane reality, but it seems to be just the other way around. Mundane reality and conceptualizing and thinking seems to be more the predominant experience.

Aaron: I understand what you're asking, John, and thank you. My reply would be simply: Fear. The fear of ceasing to exist is perhaps the most powerful of any sentient being.

Unless there is permission to address that fear, to recognize that it's a fear that has arisen from conditions and is not an ultimate—let me say this carefully. There is no ultimate cessation to exist. That cannot be. Only the outer forms arise and cease. So, this fear is a mundane level fear. But as long as you're governed by the fear-bound mind, the fear of ceasing to exist is enormous.

The ego does not want to give up control. Only in practice, when you find yourself opening into that spaciousness of ultimate reality and can see side by side the ultimate and the mundane, can you recognize that the ultimate is a container that holds the mundane and everything else.

And that you can never slip outside of the infinite ultimate. And thus, you are always safe. Not safe in the human terms; you can fall or be shot or have a car accident and die. But the essence does not die, the body dies. What remains is the one who is awake. But be careful not to make this awakeness into a "somebody."

It seems like the human must move through such process numerous times to deeply ground itself in knowing itself as the one who is awake, trusting the truth of itself as I AM. Not, "I am awake;" just, I AM, and all else is. We Are. Love Is.

Everything that is ultimate expression of love, that exists, and I cannot cease to be that, no matter in what form I present myself.

Your practice gives you multiple opportunities to explore that truth, until finally the part of you that is, I don't want to say human, because the rabbit and the bird, the fish, will experience the same fear. The mundane self finally lets go and rests in the truth of its experiences. And then there is really no more fear on that level.

If you talk to people who have had near death experience and returned from that experience, they will tell you they are no longer afraid of death because there is no such thing as death, only the body ceasing temporarily and then coming back in another form. But the essence cannot die.

By getting to know the essence and trusting the essence you become able to move past the old fears.

It's a kind of a balancing act. You move back and forth, resting in spaciousness, resting in awakened mind, then coming back to explore. What is this mundane expression of

the Unconditioned that I am? And how does it come and go, interact with everything else?

You become increasingly adept at watching fear and other heavy emotions arise, just saying, “Ah, you again, Teacher—hello.” Not caught in the stories.

Even those who have had what is sometimes called a sudden awakening, most will need to come back and test that awakening against their relative reality.

From my perspective, what you are learning here is to rest ever more deeply in the heart and reality of love, and to find the immensity—not just the immensity but the infinity of love, and to learn the ways that love can support you. To learn what love is.

I pause. If there is further question based on that, please go ahead.

John: I have no further question. Thank you, Aaron.

Aaron: It really is a wonderful progression. At first, completely lost in the fishbowl. Gradually you find the intention and courage to peek out. Getting to know who you are. Starting to see the non-duality of living in the fishbowl and living in the immensity of the Unconditioned.

Each time you experience it both in formal meditation and also mindfully in daily life, you move out of reactivity to the various mind and body experiences that cause contraction and bring you into that contracted state of limitation.

You begin to know your divinity and your power. Not YOUR power but THE power of love. And you begin to trust it.

And this is truly the taming of the mind, the tending of the mind as if it were a garden.

It takes a lot of love, a lot of trust. The sangha is so important, here, because you hear the fears from each other. You learn to trust that fear is part of the learning experience, rather than something to be gotten rid of. It's okay to be afraid. It's okay to experience limitation.

In my final human lifetime, lying there on the ground in the rain, in the mud, with the tiger growling at my feet, the sharp thorns just barely scratching my skin, but not permitting any movement, fear of course came up.

This being I am, this Buddhist monk, he is impermanent. The thought was not so much what will happen to me when the tiger eats me or the tree comes down harder on me and kills me, but who am I? What remains when this body passes on?

This is the big question for people. And it's something that initially needs to be taken on in some faith. You hear people talking about it, but until you actually die you can't know that something continues to exist, or what continues.

But as you practice with the dissolution of the aggregates, and keep wondering what remains, and see clearly what remains, then you have a direct experience of what remains beyond the aggregates, both the material aggregates and consciousness. What remains?

The issue here is not whether something remains, or getting to know a label for what remains, but seeing how much clinging there is to be, to continue, because this is part of life— everything strives to continue. As human you believe that continuation only is within the aggregates.

But when you relax and allow the dissolution of the aggregates, then you see for yourself what remains: this awakened essence that is love. And it changes everything.

At that point you are taming the ox, let us say taming the fear mind, and getting ready to bring mind home. Taming the mind and getting ready to make it a servant of the human in this life, rather than the ruler. Then you bring the mind home; you bring everything home and begin to live from that state of awakesness.

We're running out of time, here. Is there a further question or sharing, before I pass this on to John?

Q: Thank you for this inspiring talk. In our practice there are the wisdom practices and the practices of the heart. I often find that when I am resting in spacious awareness, it feels vast and still, peaceful, safe, but I don't always feel love there, whereas through the heart practices I am able to access compassion, gratitude, love.

Through pure awareness practice and other practices of resting in awareness, how do we access the sense of love, or *can* we access that sense that everything is love? How do they come together?

Aaron: There is that old joke, a human with a violin case, looking around, seeming lost and asks a passerby, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" You know that one: "Practice, practice." With practice, the practices cease to be two separate practices, wisdom, and compassion, and come together.

If you only focus on one and never do the other, they can't come together. If you trust these two wings and practice here, when it feels like it's becoming a bit too locked in, let go of the wisdom and just move into compassion, into various Brahma Vihara practices. If it gets too wishy washy, come back, and sharpen the mind again. Focus with mindfulness. Keep bringing them together. And they will come together and burst open together.

Q: Perfect. Thank you.

Aaron: Alright, it's 6:55pm, so I'm going to pass you on to John. I love you all very much. And I am asking a LOT of you to ask you to trust me when I say, yes, I have walked this way, and it is safe. Not that the human you are will always be safe, but that the essence that you are will wake up, and in waking up, will succeed in helping all beings everywhere to find this freedom and love. It is doable. Thank you for trusting me and walking with me. I know it's sometimes very hard; I've been there as a human.

Thank you, and I'll pass this to John.