The Wisdom of Life Itself

As our politics, economy, society and the global climate all show signs of breaking into pieces, we can stay whole by tapping the wisdom of life itself

(A Dharma talk given by Doug McGill at the Rochester Meditation Center on Thursday, Jan. 19, 2017)

Tonight is the second night we are devoting to understanding, through a dharma lens, what's happening in our consciousness as the result of the statements, actions and activities of our new President and his administration. These are stirring up a lot of anxiety, fear, anger and other harmful emotions in many of us these days.

We can start by doing what we always do when we sit down to meditate, or anytime we bring up awareness in life. We begin by touching in with our intention to keep our focus the quality of our consciousness, and to improving the quality of our consciousness through our thought and actions as best we can. That's the practice.

Actions and activities in the world, and the speech and actions of people around us, these have an impact on our consciousness. This is what we are looking at. We are trying to be skillful with what's happening in our consciousness. More specifically, we see what's happening as clearly as possible and then we ask, "Are we unconsciously reacting or consciously responding to what is arising in our minds?"

When we meditate, either in formal sitting or continuous daily practice, we try to see things more clearly than we usually do. We try to see consciousness clearly. Having gained that clarity, we then take a next step. We work with experience so that our conscious response is expressed in words and actions that promote health, healing, creativity, positive energy, community and harmony. It seems an especially urgent task right now because feelings and emotions are running so high, are so uncomfortable and distressing, even terrifying and paralyzing sometimes. Under the circumstances, the risk of reacting unskillfully to our experience of these dark days—and thus perpetuating suffering instead of dissolving it—is very high indeed.

So this gets us started. We intend to heal.

We want to bring the transforming capacity of consciousness more into our experience. We can even say that we hope to use these desperate days to develop our transformative consciousness more actively, more successfully than ever. We can use every pain and every struggle, every confusion and frustration, as a
doorway to open transformative consciousness. Over and over, we can learn how to walk straight from pain to peace and from there to leading a truly purposeful life, fully and deeply involved with others. Helping all life unfold with spontaneous equanimity, wisdom and joy. These are the qualities of consciousness and they can be ours.

If we do this, each one of us individually, and then in larger and larger groups, we'll naturally grow together, knowing ourselves always as one. Then all will be okay.

Let me tell you about something that happened to me today. As I was going about my day, I was thinking, "How can I offer something tonight that isn't abstract about all of this? Something that's real? Something that comes up straight out of my life of what I just called transformative consciousness. How is it working for me today?"

As many of you know, my 94-year-old Mom recently went into hospice care. This is her fifth day at the Seasons Hospice House, out in the woods southwest of Rochester. She's in a phase of life where things are slowing down dramatically, a little more every day. Her awareness isn't slowing down, it's as brilliant and robust as ever. But her body and her mind are slowing down. She has profound dementia and her speech and memory are almost entirely gone. Her life now is largely moving from her bed, to a lounge chair, to a commode, and various permutations thereof.

I try to see her every day, to feed her a meal and sit with her for a while. When I came into her room today she was sitting in her reclining chair, with a blanket over her lap, looking out a big picture window into the woods. There's a bird feeder just outside her window. An occasional squirrel, deer and or wild turkey sometimes strolls by. I sat down next to her and they brought in lunch and I started to feed her lunch. About half of lunch she eats herself, the other half I feed to her.

We were having a quiet, peaceful, beautiful time. I had my iPhone on the moveable lunch table, screen down. Then I noticed, as I was feeding my Mom, how attracted I was to the iPhone. I noticed how sorely tempted I was, after only a few minutes of sitting there so peacefully with my Mom, to pick up the phone and start reading Twitter and my emails. And maybe I could do a little web surfing.

Something in my mind just wasn't satisfied with the peace and contentment I was experiencing right then with my Mom. Something in me wanted more. Isn't that strange? I was mindful enough to resist picking up the iPhone. But I could feel the muscles in my arm and hand tensing up from time to time, readying to reach out and grab it with a power that was struggling to defeat my purest intentions. These are my
Mom's last days on Earth, my very last chances to be with her. Yet here I was wanting to submerge myself in Internet news and trivia. I was really feeling the pull.

By bringing aware consciousness to that moment, I could see what was going on, resist the temptation to disappear into the Internet, and instead I was able to stay with my Mom in those precious moments. I was able to stay in life as opposed to illusion. It's an example of the transforming consciousness that we strive to empower by meditation. It was a very ordinary but still profound Dharma teaching, that we are so often attracted to plunge our consciousness into superficiality and illusion. Illusion seems more real, more interesting and alluring, than the actual aliveness of every moment. The teaching of the Dharma says over and over, stay with life, stay with what's real. When we are attracted to concept and more specifically to greed, hatred and delusion, we need to recognize when that happens and then, to the degree that we can, to let it go and to stay instead with life. So that we can keep our attention on life and in that way to really live. To not miss our lives, not for a moment.

There are many Dharma ways to understand what's going on in the world today, and our response to it. Tonight I'd like to choose just one of those Dharma windows, through the word "responsibility."

The word "responsibility," the idea behind it, is becoming more obviously and urgently important every day as the world breaks down under the weight of many factors that have been building for a very long time.

The crisis of climate change. The crisis of capitalism. The crisis of our nation as an over-extended militaristic empire that is now in its "decline and fall" phase. The crisis of our decayed democracy. The crisis of unchecked global nuclear proliferation. The crisis of poverty and inequality. And now, the election of a new U.S. president whose policies seem precisely and intentionally designed to light a match to every one of these crises so that they explode all at once.

What is our responsibility in such a world, at such a time? What is our responsibility to ourselves and others? To our own being and to all other beings?

Before we begin to answer these questions we need to pause for a moment to ask ourselves, in all candor and honesty: What is responsibility after all? Do we even understand what we mean by responsibility?

What's a Dharma understanding of responsibility? Let's be clear about this.
In ordinary usage there is something heavy and burdensome about the word "responsibility." The word stirs up a weariness, an exhaustion, an inner resistance that says, "I don't need yet another responsibility, I already have enough responsibility in this life. Give me a break from yet more responsibility!"

In this way of understanding, "responsibility" is an obligation, a debt. It promises more commitments, more duties, more items on the To Do List. Overwhelm looms.

Each of the crises we face seems to require us to shoulder more and yet more responsibility—to address this, fix that, solve this. It seems perfectly clear that all of these problems lie far beyond the capacity of one individual person to meaningfully address. It's even perhaps beyond humanity's collective ability to solve. Under such conditions, what is our responsibility? And, again, to begin with, how do we understand responsibility and action?

My suggestion a Dharma understanding of responsibility is not as a weight or as a burden but instead as an innate capacity—as "response-ability." The ability to respond. It's a power that in the deepest sense we don't even have, or own and control, but rather it's a flowing power of life that we are in our essence. Our being is response-able. In a twinkling we shift the way we understand ourselves, from an inert noun, a helpless and overwhelmed body and mind, to an active and infinitely responsive verb whose life is defined as a continuous responsiveness to all things.

When I think of responsibility in this way, an aliveness happens that is inexpressibly energizing. Going back to the story about my Mom, I'd say that by noticing but not reacting to the compulsive urge to pick up my iPhone—a state of mind called "greed" in Dharma terms—I expressed my essence as response-ability. As a flow of energizing wisdom, instead of an inert being waiting for stimulation. That greed arose but simultaneously I recognized that I had a choice whether to pursue it or not. I chose not to pick up my iPhone and to enter its illusory world. That left me free to spend some precious living moments with my Mom. I was liberated into life itself.

In Dharma terms, to plunge into the illusory world of the iPhone, with its endless stream of words and images flowing by, luring us into it, is an impulse towards death. Because websites, GIFs, blogs, Tweets and YouTubes aren't alive. They are displays of symbols. There's no life to them. They're an imaginary world. We get twinges of reactivity in the body to electronic words and images but in that state were are like a science experiment—helpless, pinned-down blobs of flesh reacting to electrical bursts to our system. Whereas, knowing ourselves as pure response-ability, we become active instead of passive beings. Sitting with Mom, I feel her
warmth, her breath, her moods, each subtle shift of her body and especially, in her current decline, her needs. When hunger, discomfort, the urge to adjust her posture or other natural urges strike, I'm able to instantly be there with the best response to keep her comfortable, clean, protected and safe. We interact as one shared life.

This is not like saying "I, Doug McGill have the ability to respond." Rather, I'm saying that such moments of awareness I recognize my true identity as far beyond "Doug McGill." It's life itself, of which "Doug McGill" is an infinitesimally small part.

This larger consciousness responds naturally and effortlessly to my thoughts and emotions, and to my Mom's presence and her needs. And to far more than that. In fact, to everything else in the universe. It's that connected. It's an enhanced sensitivity to everything that arises which is response-ability to everything. In this way, I know real response-ability as life itself, and this is my true life. It's energizing to know ourselves in this way, as infinite response-ability, as the flow of life itself.

There's a famous story about an ancient Chinese Zen master, Yun Men. On his deathbed a student asked him, "What is the highest and most profound teaching of all the Buddhas?" His famous answer was "an appropriate response."

This speaks to what I'm trying to sketch out here, in my own words, from my own experience. That there is something that happens when we are in flow with life, which is possible any time we are aware that we are aware and stay that way. In such a state we don't identify with anything—not our bodies, thoughts, emotions or perceptions. Instead we see each of these as they arise and in this way we retain the ability—not from the conscious mind made of stored memories, but instead from an intelligence that suddenly comes "on tap" in awareness—to respond as needed to everything that arises. In just the way that's needed, and in just the right amount.

The Buddha is a perfect example of such response-ability. So many different people came to the Buddha, from so many different backgrounds, with so many different needs. He knew how to skillfully respond to each one of them, each in a different way. To some he would offer a story, to others a practice, to others a touch, to others a sharp rebuke. Likewise he met every challenge that arose in his own life—which included backaches and headaches, schisms in his community, challenges to his power and even assassination attempts—with a flowing, faultless, intuitive grace.

There are many models of enlightened beings who model this kind of magically spontaneous, selfless response-ability in their lives—St. Francis of Assisi, Socrates, Jesus Christ, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Dorothy Day, on and on. Isn't it
interesting when someone has broken through to this level of life, what they model
to us is a life defined by pure generosity and giving. They give away everything and
basically just serve, and in this way find happiness. The people we most admire
always do that. They beg for food, always help others, sleep wherever they can, and
basically pursue a life that's opposite to the fearful, protective, grasping and
acquisitive life that we normally live. Our way is to create happiness by acquiring all
the material objects (including substances, activities, relationships and states of
mind) that we believe will make us happy. Their way, the way of the enlightened, is
to give away everything right down to their sense of self, their ego. They are often
basically homeless, teaching the Dharma or however they define universal truth,
while taking care of animals, or the poor and the sick. In this particular way, which is
a kind of complete letting go, they transform into a steady flow of response-ability.

Their consciousness includes everybody. Their consciousness doesn't have
boundaries. The fact that they aren't making boundaries with their minds gives them
a profound ability to connect with people spontaneously and deeply, and to
effortlessly draw on a wisdom that unfailingly tells them what to do and say. They
have learned how to discover and trust this flow of wisdom and they go along in life.

I also felt like I would like to offer, tonight, as another role model of response-ability,
a cell in my pinky finger. I am picking a pinky cell but you could pick any one of the
50 to 100 trillion cells in the human body. So there is a cell my pinky finger, here.

This cell doesn't have within it a brain that is always saying, like our brain says to us,
"I am thinking this, feeling that, deciding this, choosing that." Instead, freed from
such a voice, the cell is just constantly and spontaneously responding to everything
that is happening inside of it and outside of it. And that is basically all that it does
throughout it's whole life. It simply responds to itself and to its surroundings. It's very
being is defined as being in response to everything else, where this "everything
else" is actually not just in this body but everything in existence, yes?

It lives within, and is constantly responding to, an infinitely large chain of causes and
effects from which it was born and into which it is constantly expressing its life, and
back into which it will finally dissolve once again. The gravity of the moon influences
every cell in our body; as does every ray of the sun; and no doubt every speck of
matter and even more so, every speck of dark matter and energy in the universe.
The pinky cell, without thinking about it, is in a constant state of response-ability to
all of these forces as well as to the universe of the human body it sits within. This
state is not one of many characteristics of the cell, but instead defines its life, itself.
In other words, life is response-ability and response-ability is life. In this way, if we discover our response-ability we discover our own infinite powers and our own lives.

No pride, no ego, no "I." Just pure, egoless, appropriate response in the sense that Yun Men was saying. What we are in our utmost essence is this response-ability.

We are infinity that got expressed in this limited form, as this identity, this body. But we needn't, and we shouldn't—not if we want to develop inclusive consciousness—hold too tightly to this limited identity. Especially, we need to loosen how we typically identify and hold so tightly to our bodies, our minds, our thoughts and emotions.

This is what Dharma practice is for. We want to use it in order to get an actual, visceral, tangible and direct sense of our connectedness to everything. Because only in this way, by actually experiencing the inclusive consciousness, the flow of life, "response ability"—only in this way will gain the confidence to give up how we typically identify with our thoughts and instead become that larger beneficent flow.

If we experience it, we'll know it and believe in it. This would be a skillful belief. That's what meditation does. It gives us the experience of life the "way it is," as the Buddhist say. We come to trust and believe in that experience. That's what the Buddhists call "Right View." Then, we build our lives on these thoughts that come from, and accurately describe, reality itself. After that, nothing can go wrong in our lives, because our thoughts themselves are grounded in reality. We are in sync with reality. It starts with understanding, because we have actually and tangibly experienced, our ultimate intimacy with everything, our ultimate oneness.

Humanity's tragic quirk is that this understanding is hard to come by. For whatever reason—it's just how we were made—human beings come with a mind whose words and symbols usually pull us away from life into fantasy and illusion. Especially, we indulge the illusion of an "I," an omnipotent being to whom this life seems to be happening. Moreover, it's an "I" whose thoughts assert they can solve every problem of problem of the mind, the body and the world. In this way, they promise to lead us to lasting health and happiness in this life. Notwithstanding that for millennia the human thinking mind has not solved the problems of human suffering, but indeed has magnified them, we nevertheless go on believing in the illusory "I."

If only we were able to tangibly and consciously experience the flow of life itself, as opposed to the flow of our thoughts, we could let go of our illusions, and tap into the wisdom of life itself. We could release the tight grip of identification which saps so much of our life energy, releasing it for use instead as our true response-ability,
which will flow like undammed water once that release comes. Again, this meditation's aim. It's to provide a taste of our true nature as beings of infinite oneness with all other beings, constantly interacting and responding with unfathomable sensitivity to all of life around us.

Life goes better with meditation because, once we know ourselves in this visceral and tangible way, as one with everything, we quite naturally thereafter treat everything around us as gently and as wisely as we treat ourselves—because everything around us is the same as ourselves. This larger self is our vast new "I."

For a time at least, our minds, which by nature divide experience with thoughts, will continue to tell us otherwise. Our thoughts come along and say, "Oh, this thing you call life, it's just way too complex, way too big and uncontrollable. Let's break it down." But when we break down life, we get into trouble. If we dissect a rabbit, we'll know the organs of the rabbit, but we won't have a clue about it's life. In fact, we destroyed its life for the sake of gaining knowledge! But it's the knowledge of death not life. Meditation brings us to the knowledge of the flow of life itself. Real wisdom.

Our conventional sense of "I" is an idea, not a reality. The reality is non-separation and the "I" is the ultimate example of separation. It sets us apart from other beings and indeed against our own selves. In this way, our idea of ourselves—and thus the way we organize and live our lives through our thoughts and actions—falls out of alignment with reality itself. That is, our very thoughts, which determine the quality of our lives, put us out of sync with reality. That is a surefire recipe for suffering.

In a sense, the idea of "I" is a kind of useful propaganda. It's useful for physical survival but is diametrically opposite to spiritual growth to become our true selves.

The idea of "I" as a separate being allows us to pour our life's energies into amassing resources to feed this limited being, and to building walls around this limited being. Up to a point, activities like this support the life of individual bodies and minds but only, as we have seen, at the expense of our happiness. But we do enhance our ability to survive as individuals in the short run, at least a little bit. But at the same time we shut off of our conscious access to the infinite response-ability to the universe itself that is intelligent enough to maintain life in its infinite complexity, continuously and effortlessly. If we imagine ourselves to be in our essence limited physical beings, we limit our access to that larger cosmic intelligence from which we are made and which is manifesting through us in every moment. Also, we limit our ability to survive in the long run. That's because support for our life ultimately comes from the larger intelligence which created us and sustains us. If we shut ourselves
off from this source, we'll obviously die and if our species keeps itself closed off from this source energy and wisdom, then the whole human species will necessarily die.

Anyway, it was helping me today, to think of that cell in my pinky finger as a great role model for response-ability. With my whole being, like Walt Whitman, I proclaim that I would like to be like that cell in my pinky finger, spontaneously response-able to everything that happens around me in every moment. I would like to be infinitely response-able to every one around me, through the selfless emotions of kindness, patience, wisdom and generosity. I wish for this because it feels good to live this way—it's blissful—and also because I know that in the long run that's what will support me and all of life the best.

How do we experience, tangibly and viscerally, the sense of our oneness with all other beings? That's what vipassana does. That's what it does for me.

The practice of vipassana returns attention, over and over, to awareness, which is the flow of reality. We come right back to what is actually happening right now which is a constant flow of sensations, thoughts and perceptions. Sensations of the body, thoughts of the mind and perceptions of the five senses. That's what life is, is a constant awareness of all of these experiences rising and falling, appearing and disappearing. Lo and behold, if we keeping our attention continuously on what is actually happening for five minutes, 10 minutes, 30 minutes, an hour, a day, 30 days, a year—we find that things start to go much better in our lives.

At first our mind freaks out. It says, "Wait a minute, if we detach from the mind, we aren't going to have our thoughts to keep us going, to keep us alive, to figure things out step by step so we can stay happy, health, safe and protected." In this way, thought makes the case for continuing to identifying with our thoughts for dear life.

And so we might automatically and unquestioningly continue to believe our thoughts when then tell us that they, and they alone, are the ultimate guarantor and protector of happiness. And indeed, of life itself. When a philosophical genius like Descartes, representing our dominant scientific and rationalist culture, comes along and says "I think, therefore I am," we can see how deeply we've identified the thoughts of our mind, with life itself. How tragic, given the brief life of thought! And we can seen then more clearly than ever, how reluctant we will be to letting go of our thoughts. It's because deep down, trained as moderns, we think that if we do that we will die!

Thankfully, we can experience otherwise, and through this experience come to believe otherwise. In a moment's experience, we can know our own consciousness,
the simple sense of being aware, as the ground source of existence through which the wisdom of the universe flows. Awareness, which we can know in our own experience in a split second, is like the flowing blood stream of infinite intelligence which silently and effortlessly directs the continuous response-ability of every element in creation, towards every other element, in balance, in perpetuity. These statements are verifiable in the actual, direct experience of awareness in vipassana.

Let's take a moment to remind ourselves why we are taking this tour through vipassana meditation. It's because we want to establish in our minds how, very practically, we can connect ourselves with the supremely intelligent flow of life itself.

Because only this intelligence contains the wisdom we will need to solve the problems that face humanity today. These challenges are already contributing to changes in the earth's climate and to the death of many species, which in turn will inevitably, unless humanity changes course, lead to the death of the human species.

More importantly, vipassana meditation shows us how these great questions of human survival are not separate from, but are one and the same as, the question of our own self-understanding. If we learn how to understand ourselves as we truly are, as beings of nature capable of flowing in nature's flow, then we'll live. But if we can't expand our consciousness to include that understanding, we'll obviously perish for lack of connection to the flow of life which maintains us, individually and collectively.

The intelligence of life itself contains not only practical but also emotional and spiritual wisdom. These come in the forms of compassion, joy, equanimity and other mind-states that we'll need to successfully navigate through the many wrenching challenges that are sure to come at us with ferocity and power, over time. We're going to need these calm, clear and balanced mind-states, in times of growing crisis. We'll need them to help us stay calm, clear of mind, directed and resolute in action.

This kind of profound strength and wisdom won't come from the calculations of raw analytical intelligence, but only from the vaster wisdom that guides life itself.

Bringing it back to my story of Mom, the more I stay grounded in the flow of what's actually happening, in living reality, the better the overall experience for us both.

Simply sitting next to Mom, holding her hand, sometimes letting her head rest on my shoulder, I notice her breath, her warmth and her being just as I continuously notice my own breath, my own warmth, my sensations, my thoughts, my being. In this way I easily can experience our two lives as one, not in a mystical way but instead in a
very straightforward and practical way. It's just how it is. A practical caring quality pervades this awareness. Fully present with my Mom, if she shifts in her chair, I subtly shift my posture in response. If she sighs or turns her head, or opens her eyes, my own response-ability knows what to do, and how to do it, immediately and without thought. Especially if she is suddenly hurting or uncomfortable, a response comes along spontaneously in the form perhaps of a kiss on the forehead, a stroke of the arm, or giving her a glass of water, or perhaps calling for help from other caregivers at the hospice house. The appropriate response is there, right when it's needed, without thought. It's the universe providing its support through me.

There is a momentum to this way of living that counteracts the momentum that normally drives us which is the momentum of our compulsions, our unconscious reactivity to life in terms of getting, getting, getting or avoiding, avoiding, avoiding. These types of activities keep building "me" and "I." We almost always are busily working to keep that momentum going. We're afraid if we relax it we will be destroyed. But once we actually are able to relax our constant habit of ego-construction, we become happier and more alive, more response-able.

There is so much to be gained by being able to touch this natural ability we have to respond to what's actually happening in life. To the nitty-gritty of life. And how much we gain when we pull ourselves away from the magnetic attraction of our thoughts and find a way instead to stay grounded in the process of life itself. In reality.

Being with my dying Mom, tells me how to be with my dying world.

I've tried tonight to use touchstones from my own experience, even more than pulling in Dharma teachings. Because I want the roots of my understanding to come from my own actual experience of life. This is what we try to do in this practice. We try to root our life in the lessons we draw from our own life. Not from books, although books can be helpful pointers to our life and inspiration from great souls.

Ultimately we want to draw the lessons we need out of our own life. That continuing process is response-ability, the process of life itself. My own experience has been, and I almost laugh to say it, that when meditation "succeeds," when things have gone well, it's because I've been able to detach from my thoughts for a long period of time, that I'm able to enter the flow of life. Which does include thoughts, no doubt. But thoughts are just such a tiny, tiny, tiny part of the totality of experience.

That little tiny part is in the habit, unfortunately, of grabbing 99% of our attention.
We all go into our cell phones these days. Anybody been to a museum recently? I was at the Museum of Modern Art in New York recently, I hadn't been there for like 20 years. And half the people standing in front of these great masterpieces were taking photos with their iPhones. As if they were going to look at these works of art later, but not now. But why not now? Right now is the only moment we have to live.

Living artists spend their lives to put paint on the canvas in a certain way, so that their living expression will jump into our hearts and minds, through the magic of art.

When we stand before a painting we can literally almost feel the artist moving their hands and their bodies. Because that's what the paint is showing us, is a record of a real life that's been lived, a tracing of physical and mental movements, right there on the canvas. The life of the artist inhabits us then for a few moments and we get to know, viscerally, what they knew and know. But here we are at the Museum of Modern Art, half the people are taking pictures and then moving along.

"Oh, I'll have that wonderful experience later. I'll go home and download it."

Do we ever get around to living? When do we get around to living? That's a question.

Hospice is on my mind. My first wife passed away in 2008 and she was in hospice care before she died, just as my Mom now is. My experience with my first wife fits right in to this case I'm trying to make tonight for the flow of life, that we can really trust the wisdom of life itself. We can deeply trust the flow of life to sustain us. We can say "Thoughts, you're good on some occasions for some things, but I'm not going to live in you, I'm going to live in the flow of life." We can actually trust that.

Caren had a brain tumor, it was a very gradual and slow process. There was incremental decline over a period of ten years. Over that period you have a lot of opportunity for anxiety to arise. "Oh, how is she going to die? When is she going to die? Am I going to do the right thing in the last hours? The last days? Am I going to be able to say what I need to say, when I need to say it?" These types of things. You can get so tied up with these questions, so anxious and worried, that you aren't really paying attention to the person who's right there in front of you.

So anyway, one day I was suffering these anxieties, and the hospice nurse noticed and she simply said: "Don't worry. What you need will appear when you need it."
I stuck by those words until the end with Caren, and they really helped, and I came to realize I could trust them. They described the flow of life that we can deeply trust.

The hospice nurse was saying that whatever courage, practicality or common sense that you need to do X, Y, Z during the dying process, this will appear right you need it. It will tell you what to do and how to do it. All that you need to do to receive these kinds of wisdom, is to maintain the alertness and the awareness to notice it. If you allow yourself to get caught up in your fears and your worries, you won't notice it.

But if you are aware, then the common sense you need will be there when you need it. The necessary courage will be there when you need it. So will the necessary patience, kindness, and wisdom be there. With Caren, I was worried about my ability to change her when the time came. She became incontinent and I'd never done a thing like that before. Six months before it happened, three months before, even a week before it first happened, I was stressing and didn't even want to think about it.

But when it happened, it was no problem. Not at all! It was like, of course I need to do this right now. I'd been fretting about it for quite a while, but when it happened, it was like, "Oh, yes." It was absolutely nothing. It was nothing to change her. Not only that, it was actually one of the most intimate things I ever did with her. Which is weird to say in a way, but definitely not in another. And it just came about as a flow.

So, that's what I'm talking about. This is real life, isn't it?

And by the way, I saw the same thing happen with Caren herself. What she needed always appeared right when she needed it. The courage, the common sense, what to say, what to do. It all came along right when she needed it, and it showed her exactly how to live until she died. And then it showed her how to live through that. I'm talking about death but death is a great teacher of how to live.

Everything is on the line with death. That's the same thing with today. There's a lot on the line right now in this world. Am I right? There's a lot on the line. Death is near and it's obvious there is a lot on the line. There is a lot to learn about how to live.

There's a lot of life and death on the line right now in the world and it's not a matter of politics, right or left, Democrat or Republican. It's what happening with the polar ice caps, the rain forests, and all the species on earth, and also in our society, our economy, mass migrations, war and peace. Breakdown is happening everywhere and also within ourselves, within consciousness. As things land inside us, we need to respond with aware wisdom, not oblivious reactivity. We need to be in flow with
reality in order to have the right answers appear spontaneously at our fingertips.
Flow will do that for us and our anxious, fearful, plodding minds never will. Our minds will not provide the ultimate answers we need, not now or ever. They'll give us incremental answers but those must serve an ultimate answer that comes from life itself and not the thinking mind. Over-thinking got us into this mess in the first place.

The thinking mind creates more problems than anything else. We need to be in flow with reality in order to come up with the ultimate answers only life itself can provide.

Life itself will provide what we need, right when we need it. And, boy, do we need some practical answers, some courage and some equanimity right now. So, boy, do we need to buckle down and become aware, more conscious now than ever before.

The universe, life itself, has done a good job so far, hasn't it? In terms of creating bountiful miracles, winning, surviving, moving on, it does a great job. We need to harness these resources, this intelligence, this creativity. And we do that by getting in flow I think, what I've been talking about. And the flow is, response ability. It's to be able to do what's necessary right now, just because life is telling you to do it.

I was just saying that the same rule applied to Caren. She was stressing out, because she knew she was dying, and she was worried that she wouldn't do the right thing, say the right things. But we had a lot of intimate moments of the sort I mentioned, not the kind of moment we would fantasize about with our conventional minds. But believe me, they were incredibly heart-expanding and mind-blowing. Like the fact that I changed her, that was precious to me, and I hope also to her. The first time I did it, I wasn't so good at the whole procedure and so we ended up taking a shower together. That was a memorable shower! Nothing like it ever in my life.

In those moments, she was always there for me, just like I was there for her. There was a oneness, you could say. It was shared, it was 100 percent mutual. When things had to be done, they were done. When things had to be said, they were said naturally and they were said in a spontaneous effortless flow.

The day before Caren died, most of her language was taken by her brain tumor. But the day before she died, she got up on her elbows in bed and she looked me straight in the eye and she said, "I will be able to do it." She said that three times, and then she added, just one time, "Without hurting you." Then she lay back down. Boom. She said it. It just came out. She did a great job. It was so natural. I saw her work for it, but it finally happened in a flow. An easy flow and I was moved to tears.
The things we need to do, we'll be able to do.

The things we need to say, we'll be able to say.

It's a Dharma lesson. Dharma is all about flow. It's about life. Real life. It puts things in perspective. It says "Thoughts are real but they are only a part, and in fact they are only a small part of all of life. Be careful with thoughts, especially, because thoughts have this particular attraction in human beings to lure us away from life itself and to put us into imaginary states. Where we like to live." It's fine to have thoughts. We just have to be careful not to move in with our thoughts. We want to stay with life as much as possible. Things will go well when we do that.

There's a catch-phrase I've been using recently, and I've shared it sometimes here.

We want to cultivate the ability to know reality as a refuge. That's the phrase, to know reality as a refuge. To not run away from reality, but instead to see that reality itself, life itself, is the true refuge. All that we need is right there in reality.

Normally, we think of reality as earthquakes and storms and difficulties and all the arrows of misfortune coming at us, and that we need to protect ourselves. But true reality is response ability, which is the ability to deal spontaneously with whatever comes our way, pleasant or unpleasant, easy or hard. That's a Dharma lesson.

Vipassana, in particular, is a practice that puts us right in the flow of life. It trains us to stay with the raw sensations of our life and that when we do that, our consciousness expands. It expands and will know things that the thinking mind will never know. Because thoughts can never know, they are only known. Thoughts are impermanent, infinitesimal energy blips that are known by the greater dimension of intelligence that we today we have been calling consciousness, awareness, or flow.

Let me offer a final Dharma lesson, a more explicit teaching. Remembering, I hope, that these types of reflections are part of a preparation for the likelihood that these types of tools for holding ourselves will be much-required for the days ahead.

To say this much, is only to say that I take our new President at his word. He has said that we need to seriously consider starting another nuclear arms race. And there are any number of other things he has promised which, if they are enacted, will radically change our community and society. Banning Muslims from coming into this country; "bombing the hell out of Isis;" re-opening CIA interrogation "black sites" around the world and vastly increasing torture as a military intelligence tool.
He has proposed energy policies that would speed up instead of slow global warming, hastening the exhaustion of the planet's life-sustaining resources. I don't need to recite the whole laundry list. Many of his proposals would change our social, economic and environmental realities so greatly that we will need to be able to draw upon a greater intelligence than our thinking minds, which have largely left us in the dire situation we now find ourselves. We will need the expansive consciousness, this flowing intelligence, I have been talking about, in order to deal with life skillfully.

We are going to need response ability.

The last illustration I wanted to offer, from Buddhist scripture, is to contrast the way that we usually go about life, which is following the momentum of delusion, but that there is another way, which is the momentum of love. He called that love "metta," which is usually translated as "loving-kindness." It is another word for what tonight I've been calling the flow of life, or life itself, or the universe, or response ability.

To understand what the Buddha meant by love, consider its opposite. The Buddha warned that the most dangerous states of mind were greed, hatred and delusion. He called these three unwholesome roots, the three poisons, or the three defilements.

The key defilement is delusion. This root delusion is the belief that we are ultimately separate in our beings from others and that, as a result, we need to arm ourselves and to form alliances against others, and amass resources, and ultimately we need to nourish and protect only this one separate life right here. But, if we do that, we are making competitors and enemies of others all the time. It's this basic state of mind that has governed human activity to this point, and brought us to our current crises.

The fundamental mistake that drives this destructive way of living, is simply not recognizing that the reality of the situation is that we are all one living being. The cell in the pinky finger has no idea about its unique self and therefore. It wastes no time identifying with that idea and so can carry on in seamless partnership with the kidney, heart, brain and everything else, internally and externally. It's not holding on to a sense of self and protecting itself. It's instead flowing in response to everything around. That's reality.

In delusion, we think that if we give up our sense of self we are going to explode or disappear. When in reality the teaching says over and over, no, we become safer, we become healthier both as individuals and as a collective, because when we let go of self-centeredness we recruit all the energy, good will, intentions, skills and
resources of the whole organism, of life itself. In this way we instantly become infinitely responsive. We become healthy individuals and all of the individual cells become healthy as a whole. So we want to shift our consciousness in this way.

In Dharma terms the Buddha spoke about qualities of mind. The unhealthy qualities of mind work but only up to a point. We human beings have gotten as far as we’ve gotten largely based on that—national boundaries, individual people, hierarchies, technology, inventions. But there is a limit for how long greed, hatred and delusion will work for society and we are reaching that limit right now.

But the Buddha also says, wait, there are positive and healthy states of mind as well, and they create a momentum that is a healthy and will lead to true safety, true health. He called these healthy states of mind the Brahmaviharas, states of mind that are naturally selfless and healthy. Literally translated, Brahmaviharas means "divine abodes," sacred places to live. The key thing to remember is that when we see ourselves in this way, that we are, ourselves, the divine abode. That is, our anxieties and our fears, which make up what you might call the "small me," can at any time live safely within the "large me," which is the sacred home of these beautiful states of mind and heart. Indeed, when our fears and stresses live in this larger space of awareness, they become safe because they dissolve before they do any harm. In this way, holding ourselves as divine abodes, we can dissolve all that is harmful within our vastly expanded—our infinite and eternal—hearts and minds.

The Buddha said the primary healthy mind-state is loving-kindness, which is the wish that all beings be happy and at ease. Three other primary healthy mind states grow out of loving-kindness, depending on what types of beings loving-kindness encounters in the world. If loving-kindness meets a suffering being, it transforms into compassion, the wish that that beings not suffer. If loving-kindness meets a joyful being, it transforms into joy at that person's joy. With all beings, loving-kindness also is known as equanimity, a cool quality of mind that recognizes that whether suffering or joy is present, that all beings are on their own inevitable path of life.

So loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity are the basic list of healthy mind-states. There is a slightly expanded list that come out of the Brahmaviharas, called the Paramis, that include such beautiful emotions as generosity, patience, honesty, virtue and renunciation. Notice that the distinctive characteristic of every one of these beautiful qualities of mind is absence of a sense of "I" or "me." The more absent that sense, the purer, more beautiful and more powerful the emotion.
There is no sense of self in the patient mind, yes? Instead, the patient mind says, "Oh, you go before me, please. Finish fulfilling your needs, and then I will follow."

Authentic honesty puts the ego aside and looks at reality honestly, warts and all. Honesty says, "I'm going to put my protective instincts aside and get down to the nitty-gritty. I will see clearly at any cost to my pride and ego." That's true honesty.

Kindness is putting others before yourself, renunciation puts peacefulness for all above the satisfaction of egoic desires. And so on. The more selfless we are, the more beautiful and powerful our mind states and our presence as beings. Because with these mind states we see the reality that all beings create one indivisible reality.

What the Buddha says, is there is a momentum to living out of the mind-states of the Brahmaviharas, which is a momentum towards happiness, health and safety. Another word for this momentum, this constantly self-correcting activity of life itself, is response-ability. It's the natural response-ability of the positive mind states of loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity when they are active as the operative ones in our life. We've switched our default from delusion to metta.

Guided by this positive and healthy emotional momentum, when we want to give, we give. Because there is need to give and we respond in this way naturally and spontaneously. By life itself. We offer compassion or wisdom when they are needed, spontaneously. Likewise all the positive emotions arise and exert their power to heal and transform. It's the wisdom of life to provide exactly what is needed, right when it's needed. All we need to do is to notice that it's there. We just need to stay aware.

All practice can be seen as shifting away from the momentum of greed, hatred and delusion which has got us as far as we are. But that fuel is running out.

We need now to shift over to the momentum of loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity. We need to get those flowing and to make them the operative principles. Their essence is the response-ability of life itself. We want to cultivate that and get to know it, and increasingly to trust it. To learn how it works, and then to work with it to transform life's suffering into joy and wisdom, as life's work itself.

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