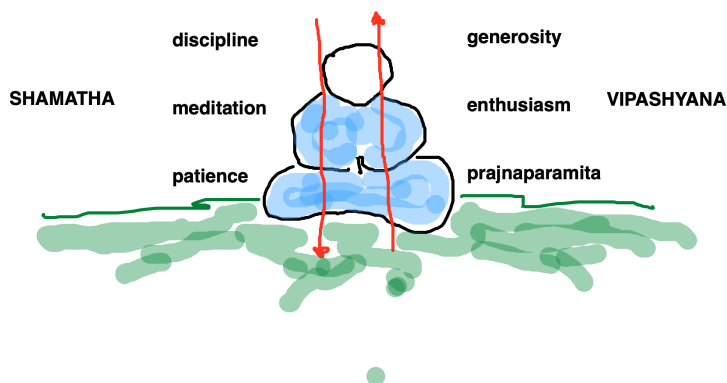


BRINGING MEDITATION TO LIFE:

A Living View Of Practice

NEIL W. MCKINLAY



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*To everyone who reminds me that
basic brilliance radiates through all of us.*

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INTRODUCTION

What follows is an edited transcript of a talk given in the Online Gatherings on Tuesday May 27, 2025. I personally gave this talk - this statement is wholly accurate. It is not, however, wholly accurate to say I molded, crafted and created it.

The Online Gatherings came into being in the first few months of 2020. Covid was spreading, with its lockdowns and quarantines. Many people I knew were also reeling from the loss of a longstanding meditation community.

Feeling the impact of both these circumstances myself, I wanted to do something in response. After a series of conversations with a friend, our first Gathering took place in early April.

I remember one instant from that initial get together very well. We were just setting out, just about to do what we always did in our recently dissolved spiritual home: recite a series of chants. 'We can't do that anymore,' a voice inside me whispered.

Honouring these words, I put my well-worn liturgies aside and we started to meditate. And so began a still-continuing journey to discover just what this new group of

practitioners was going to be.

Through the past few years, there have been a great many highlights in this undertaking. We have seen several new chants emerge. There have been revelations regarding how we meditate (like a tree, with branches and leaves, a trunk and roots, held by the earth and sky) and the importance of relatedness, of others in this practice (absolutely essential). Most affecting, however, have been our discoveries about the teachings we engage, what the meditative tradition calls the dharma.

In my own past experience, the teachings always come from some sort of elsewhere. This elsewhere might be a teacher or tradition. It might be a text. It could also be an audio recording or a taped talk. I'm sure there are other sources I'm not bringing to mind right now.

What has evolved in the Online Gatherings veers away from this tendency. While we still use buddhism as a supportive framework during our times together - after all, I did spend twenty-plus years familiarizing with this well-resourced tradition - often as not, the living, breathing source of the teachings we contemplate is our interactions with one another. Our connectedness, our relatedness, our ever-deepening sense of in-commonness or community.

I liken the whole process to quilt-making.

In our discussions, emails, chats, and posts in the Online Gatherings, I am continually listening/feeling for instants that elicit a notable response in myself and/or others.

When such a moment presents itself, I place it aside in the same way a quilt-maker does a resonant piece of fabric.

In time, I begin placing these momentary pieces beside one another, sensing for some kind of greater pattern, some kind of whole. Eventually - sometimes after a few hours, sometimes after months - I am able to stitch a series of instants together in a talk, a post, or a drawing.

Thinking of the talk that follows, I recall someone several years ago asking what the six paramitas have to do with meditation. This was a relatively casual question. At the time, it elicited only a small flutter of uncomfortable chuckles from those in attendance.

Yet that flutter was notable enough for me to place the instant aside and keep an eye open for any similar moments that might appear. A comment likening meditation to surrender. Pema Chodron's description of exertion as enthusiasm. An inquiry into how basic brilliance appears in our everyday lives.

Slowly but surely, a 'teaching quilt' took shape. This fabric played an enormous role in shaping the talk that follows. It also reinforces some of the main understandings of the Online Gatherings:

- Basic brilliance is alive and well in all of us;
- Through the medium of our everyday lives, this brilliance is constantly guiding us toward our path;
- While always evident, basic brilliance becomes more apparent when we honour our fundamental relatedness, when we gather in community;

- Learning how to sense and follow the guidance of basic brilliance - how to bring meditation alive - is most potently done together.

In addition to reinforcing these four main understandings, our quilt-making approach to dharma is also giving us some of the most affecting and alive meditation teachings I have ever encountered.

For example, the revelation that meditation begins with the discipline of slowing down has been a game-changer. It has introduced an ease to practice that is a relief after many years of relative effort. It has also liberated the term 'discipline' from its weighty and dreaded connotations.

Which takes us back to the beginning of this introduction and my statement that what follows is an edited transcript of a talk given in the Online Gatherings on Tuesday May 27, 2025.

It is true I personally gave this talk in the Online Gatherings on that particular date. It is only partially true, however, that I myself molded, crafted, and created it.

More accurately, everyone in this community played a role its gradual stitching together. Through our insights and uncertainties, questions, observations, and declarations, we all played some part in piecing together the beautiful quilt - the beautiful teaching, the beautiful dharma - you are about to consider.

I hope you enjoy.

And may this bring benefit.

- Neil W. McKinlay

BRINGING MEDITATION TO LIFE

Our start point today is somewhat unique. Our start point today is, 'Goodness I'm overwhelmed!'

There's a lot coming up in the Online Gatherings. We've been exploring the nature of the subtle body: the nature of the energetic, relational body - or sambhogakaya - one of three layers making up our embodied lives. We've also been looking into the nature of relationship more specifically and its deep connection with compassion. We've considered possible meanings of the Heart Sutra, the six paramitas, and more.

So a lot is coming up, which is both beautiful and tremendously affecting. In fact, our discoveries through these past several months have often left me awestruck. They certainly have shifted my sense of meditation practice and of life more generally.

As already noted, however, it's all become quite overwhelming. My mind sometimes swirls in its efforts to track everything. My body sometimes shivers instead of settles.

This past weekend, I realized I really don't know how work with this. I'm at a bit of a loss in this regard and an

appropriate way forward is not yet apparent.

In my experience, uncertain moments like this are wonderful opportunities to reflect upon just what we are doing here. What is it we are doing in the Online Gatherings?

For me there are two main things going on in this community, both of which involve remembering. On the one hand, we are remembering the fact that a basic brilliance is alive and well in each of us. All those delicious qualities and capacities we read about in books about meditation - relaxation, stability, clarity, tenderness, well-being, responsiveness - all these qualities and more live within, live through us.

Because they are basic, these qualities are not restricted to those who meditate the most or who are most familiar with buddhist terminology. They are not alive and well in meditators more than non-meditators, spiritual people over non-spiritual people, the rich versus the not so rich, the earnest versus the not so earnest. Instead, basic brilliance - a fundamental sense of knowing, sensitivity, and communicativeness - is alive and well in every one of us.

So this is one of the main things we are remembering in the Online Gatherings: basic brilliance. And this is really inseparable from a second thing that is happening in our midst: we are remembering that our lives constantly give us our path, our necessarily unique way through this life - which is something the teachings and practices of

meditation have much to say about.

Take, for example, the teaching known as the six paramitas. This is a beautiful and really quite practical articulation of how life guides us toward our path. It outlines how our basic brilliance shows up and resources us moment after moment after moment.

In brief, the paramitas point to six aspects of basic brilliance that show up in and support our practice and our lives. They are kind of like signposts on the highway of guidance that's always offered us. Sometimes described as 'transcendent' in character, they are qualities that are animated not by our limited ego agendas, but by the vastness and depth of what is innate in all of us. These six qualities are discipline, meditation, patience, the prajnaparamita, enthusiasm, and generosity.

Discipline is our willingness and capacity to slow down. I just love this. Far from being some excruciating hair shirt sort of thing, discipline denotes the simple, beautiful, gorgeous act of slowing down. We slow down our bodies. We slow down our minds. This is discipline...wow!

When we do this, when we slow down, we begin to feel the pull of somatic mindfulness. We feel our attention subtly, gently drawn toward this embodied moment.

The paramita of meditation involves surrendering to this sense of somatic magnetism. We stay with this pull. We turn toward its absorbent invitation. And, when we wander as we will, we simply let our attention return in this direction -

surrender to this draw - again and again.

Then, eventually, we begin to settle. We begin to settle into whatever this embodied moment is offering: tension or relaxation, steadiness or ill-ease, happiness or sorrow. This is settling is patience. The simple act of settling into, of taking pause, of waiting with, of witnessing whatever might be happening in this moment. In this moment. In this moment. Patience.

Take these three paramitas together and, from a meditative perspective, one has the shamatha phase of our practice. Through connecting with basic brilliance as it manifests in discipline, meditation, and patience, we begin to calmly, steadily, peacefully abide with our lives. This is shamatha.

Out of this shamatha phase comes what the tradition describes as the vipashyana phase of meditation. Here the final three of those six paramitas, those basic and brilliant qualities, come into evidence. So we see the prajnaparamita, enthusiasm, and generosity.

With the prajnaparamita we see what arises, what's appearing in our experience, what 'whooshes' into our lives, with utter clarity. Rather than seeing this moment through typical filters of habit and agenda, hope and fear, and so on, we see from the perspective of a different kind of knowing: a knowing that is more inclusive and alive than our usual modes of perception. Put another way, what's arising in our lives is seen from the perspective of good old basic brilliance.

Enthusiasm is the energy this arising experience carries.

When allowed to express without filters, when allowed to unfold on it's own terms, when seen as it is, lived experience carries a tremendous amount of energy. This is not just random energy with no sense of intention or purpose. Far from it. This energy has a discernible direction to it. It has a distinct sense of imperative, a notable orientation or guidance.

When we follow this sense of direction, when we allow our practice and our lives to be guided by this, we embody the paramita of generosity.

Whether we let this energy and orientation come into the world in an internal way, in a manner few on the 'outside' will notice, or in a more external fashion doesn't matter. Whether this energy and orientation come into the world in so-called big ways or so-called small doesn't matter either. When we let transcendent knowing (aka: the prajnaparamita) and enthusiasm, when we let basic human brilliance guide how we are: generosity.

Altogether, the six paramitas describe the process of bringing meditation to life. This is how we bring meditation alive in our lives. It is how we engage the practice to help us bring basic brilliance alive in this world. This process is extremely relevant given the situation at hand.

I have been overwhelmed by all the beautiful and brilliant and transformative and revelatory insights that are coming up here in the Online Gatherings. I'm overwhelmed by the huge shifts my understanding and

experience of meditation has been undergoing. In the midst of this, I don't know what my - what our - next step might be.

So let's bring this overwhelm and uncertainty into the framework offered by the six paramitas. Let's bring this into the practice of bringing meditation, bringing basic brilliance alive as just described.

As we do this remember, in part this community exists as an affirmation of the fact we all have this brilliance built within us. Within all of us are qualities and capacities that can be tremendous resources while we make our way through each day. I suspect we might - I certainly hope we will - notice this in what follows.

The first thing for me to do is slow down. Just slow down my body and slow down my mind for a moment. Slow down my thoughts and thinking. Slow down my skin, my muscles, my bones. Just slow down, which is the paramita - the innate quality/capacity - of discipline. Slow right down.

After doing this a while, I begin to feel the absorptive draw of... Well, the absorptive draw not simply of mindfulness as it is typically talked about, but the absorptive draw of somatic mindfulness.

When I slow down just a little, I feel this embodied moment - the apparently bounded personal body, the energetic relational body, the body of all time and space - inviting me in. Surrendering to this draw, staying with and returning to this absorptive pull, is the paramita of meditation.

As I continue to surrender to this moment, I find myself settling into the fullness of this embodied life, of my embodied life. I settle into whatever this might be right now: overwhelm, discomfort, edginess, uncertainty, prickliness, movement. I settle in and I rest. I wait. I pause. I abide. Which is the paramita of patience.

And speaking of pause, let's do something like that here. Let's pause to remember, pause to remind ourselves of something. Earlier, I described the discipline-meditation-patience portion of meditation as the shamatha phase of our practice. This is true.

A common understanding of meditation sees this as the entirety of our practice. This is not true. There is much more to meditation than slowing, surrendering, and settling. As important as these are to our sense of nourishment and rejuvenation and presence, they do not constitute the whole of our practice.

The prajnaparamita, enthusiasm, and generosity are also part of our practice. Taken together, these three make up the vipashyana phase of meditation: the phase that sees us actually bring meditation alive in our lives. The paramitas of transcendent knowing (aka: the prajnaparamita), enthusiasm, and generosity are what allow us to remember basic brilliance in an experiential, practical, and affecting way.

Okay, let's review: I've been feeling overwhelmed by all that's being revealed in this community. So I slow down, surrender to the absorptive magnetism of somatic mindfulness, and let myself settle into the fullness of this moment, into whatever is going on. I do this for several days. I do this through Wednesday, Thursday, Friday.

I am still doing this on Saturday. In the midst of our weekend Gathering, I am slowing down, surrendering, and settling. And what happens? Well, we practice together for a while. Then we open up for one of our usual thirty-minute discussion periods.

These stretches are not Q&As. They are not overly guided. They have only a little structure to them: just enough to hold us as we share discoveries and reflections, questions and possibilities. It is in this sort of atmosphere that someone speaks in favour of the paramita of patience, of just waiting.

I cannot recall precisely what we were talking about at this moment. I do, however, remember the 'whoosh!' of that instant: the sense of immediacy and resonance this comment carried. Instead of seeing through the dulling filters of habit and agenda, for the briefest sliver of time I knew from the perspective of brilliant, basic clarity. It's like suddenly seeing a two dimensional photo or painting in a three dimensional way. For me, this particular manifestation of the prajnaparamita had a quality of alert to it. As in: 'This is what you've been waiting for.'

Relatively unencumbered by those burdensome (though sometimes helpful) filters, the energy of that

moment - of that alert - finally has an opportunity to register. It is felt in the cells and the bones. It's something one might 'know in the gut' or 'feel with all our being'. In more familiar terms, intuition is a pretty good parallel. An intuition that we are being called to...

This sense of call is the inherent direction of the moment. The innate imperative of the moment. The basic wisdom of the moment offering appropriate guidance where previously there was largely overwhelm and uncertainty. This sense of call is the enthusiasm of our basic brilliance. In this case, the paramita of enthusiasm was encouraging us to embody patience, encouraging us to pause.

So this is what we've been doing in the Online Gatherings recently: taking pause. Rather than continuing to actively explore our experience of the subtle, relational body, we have entered what has become known as a period of 'Patience and Remembering'. Our weekday sessions are given more to practice than talks and discussion right now.

This shift is important to note for at least two reasons. First, it is the response to overwhelm - the next step in our shared journey - I have been anxiously waiting for. Second, to the extent taking this next step embodies the willingness, the courage, the respect, the daring, and the capacity to bring the expressive enthusiasm of our basic brilliance into the world, it exemplifies the last of the paramitas we've been discussing here: the paramita of generosity.

So here in the Online Gatherings we have been exploring the subtle body, the relational body on our way to considering its connection with the experience of compassion. And we have covered a lot of ground in this regard. A great deal has arisen within our community through the last number of months. This has been beautiful and appropriate and affecting and revelatory. And it will continue.

Bringing to mind a broad understanding of what's going on in these Gatherings, however, has suggested we pause for a while, that we give some time to patience.

And what's going on here? What are we doing in a more general way?

We are remembering that basic brilliance is alive and well in all of us. We are also remembering that, when given the opportunity, the qualities and capacities of this brilliance will offer guidance, support, and encouragement in our lives.

Very appropriately, this reminds me of a third and fourth element of what's going on here that very definitely demand acknowledgement - even if only briefly. We are remembering basic human brilliance is something we discover together, in community, as what the meditative tradition calls sangha. And we are remembering how to let this brilliance shape how we are in the world, how to bring meditation to life.

Acknowledging all of these rememberings, we're going

to pause what we've been doing and hang out with patience for a while. We're going to let ourselves wait, let ourselves linger, let ourselves rest, let ourselves abide.

In doing so, we're going to give that retinue of insights and revelations that have so altered my understanding and experience of, others' understanding and experience of meditation recently an opportunity to settle. We're going to give them an opportunity to gestate, to percolate, and to integrate before picking up that thread again.

How are we going to do this? How do we go about pausing, how do we go about embodying patience in these Online Gatherings?

Well, patience is an important part of our practice, remember. The paramita of patience, this particular manifestation of basic brilliance, is an important part of the shamatha phase, the calm abiding phase of our practice.

So following the guidance offered by the clarity, tenderness, and communicativeness of our lives, we are going to meditate together.

And perhaps this doesn't sound like much: a bunch of meditators meditating. But in this instance, we will be a bunch of meditators meditating in alignment with the clear and compassionate communicativeness of our innate brilliance - and this makes a difference.

In my view, we need a little more of this flowing into the world right now. In all honestly, we probably need a whole lot more.

As the human world seems to collapse into distracted self-centredness and disconnection, haste, impulsivity, and accumulation, we need to cultivate and be reminded of our inherent sanity at every turn possible. Whether this remembering happens through grand or subtle gestures, inward actions or more outward displays matters little.

We need to cultivate our alignment with basic brilliance. We need to be reminded of the ever-present nature of clarity, tenderness, and responsiveness, discipline, meditation, patience, transcendent knowing, enthusiasm, and generosity, and so much more.

We need, quite simply, to remember. We need to remember. Which, in this instance, is what we will be doing by meditating: we will be remembering.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Neil McKinlay is a meditation teacher and mentor. Reflecting a longstanding interest in how this work enriches and is enriched by our everyday lives, he offers a range of resources that encourage and empower us to let the wisdom we touch through our practice come into the world we share. These include two online communities (the free to access Living Meditation Network and the subscription-based Online Gatherings). He also offers classes and workshop in and around his home of Victoria, BC.

For more about Neil's work - including guided meditation practices and a current teaching schedule - please visit neilmckinlay.com.