

Attention and Intention

What I learned from watching Flint prepare for the TED talk

This is a bit longer talk than usual, but it is important for our understanding, so I hope you will listen carefully.

Most of us go through life reacting to the situations, people, and circumstances that come to us. The ups and downs, the loves and the hates, the distress, moments of happiness, the arguments, pretty much seem to arise automatically, and we have our opinions, ideas, judgments and conditioning that influence how we respond. So practice often seems to be about abandoning our opinions, ideas, judgments and conditioning so that we can have “freedom” in the way we respond to circumstances. But this is only a very limited way of understanding what true freedom is. It seems passive or merely reactive. I think this is very confusing or unclear for most people, so I want to talk today about attention and intention, and true freedom, the freedom that is the fruit of this practice, intelligently and deeply applied.

Some of you know that yesterday Flint gave one of the talks at TEDx Austin, and some of you saw that talk. It will be posted within the next two weeks, and you can be sure we will be featuring it on the Appamada site. So I’m not going to repeat what Flint said, except to note that the three key steps he talked about were *pause, reflect, and connect*. And right there you have the whole message. But most people need a little more explanation to help them understand how this message really applies in their lives. Because I watched, first-hand, Flint’s whole approach to this talk, I will share with you what I learned in the process.

The bottom line and the most startling observation I’ve made about Flint over the years is that he *consciously reflects on and designs the kind of experience he intends for himself and for others*. He sets an intention, and that intention provides the focus for his attention, throughout an experience. He does not *control* that experience, he merely maintains his attention on his intention.

Now I want you to think for a moment about what a radical act this is. It means not being helplessly buffeted about by the situations and life we somehow find ourselves immersed in. It does not mean engineering things, or creating expectations for certain

outcomes. So this is a sophisticated understanding and it is not easy to grasp. Please pay attention and I will tell you how I've come to witness and understand it over the past ten years, because it is the key to your own remarkable life.

Many people think that Flint just has the good luck to have an extraordinary, golden life. Or they may think that he is just an extraordinary person, with miraculous powers or gifts. And all of that is true. It is also true of you. But because you don't *see* this, you do not believe it, and you do not trust in yourselves to embody it. Please pay attention while I describe what I observed, watching Flint go through the TEDx preparations.

Beginning contact. When Flint was first contacted about the possibility of giving a TEDx talk, his response was pure delight and excitement. I think it's safe to say the little kid in us, the one who wants to be seen and recognized and appreciated, can't help being gratified by being singled out this way. And there was also the child's wonder, curiosity, and joy of exploring. And for Flint, of course, it meant the opportunity for some new experience, and nothing delights him more than this. Furthermore, and I know this made him very happy, it was the opportunity to bring the possibility of freedom and intimacy and connection to an entirely new group of people. You can't say this response was free from pleasure for the ego, and you can't say that it was egoic. It is really essential that you get this. We are not in the business of denying ego: we simply want to recognize it for what it is, and to use it in the service of our intention and our vow: to benefit all beings, rather than in the service of our self-centered dream: for example, of being famous. But what struck me then was that in that moment, Flint began establishing his intentions for every moment of this journey, however it might unfold.

The first luncheon. I was not there when Flint met with the producers to decide whether he would be a good candidate for a TEDx talk. But I know how he thought about it and how he discussed it with me later. I think it would be safe to say that he focused on meeting these two women in his warm, curious, and caring way, on having a lovely lunch together, and on forming a new and delightful connection, no matter what happened with the decision, the outcome, the selection process, and so on. Just a lovely lunch. He thought carefully about what he would wear, where they would meet, so that the entire experience would be a pure delight, for himself and for the producers. Not so that he could get something, not so that they would choose him to give a talk, not so that he could become a major celebrity, which, no doubt, he could become. Just so that the

luncheon would be delightful, and so that he could connect with two people, people just like you and me, who work, who struggle, who suffer, and who face, like us, sickness, old age, birth and death, loss, longing, and everything else a human life holds.

He set an intention for this encounter, and that focused his attention from the first invitation and his warm response, to the greeting at the restaurant, sitting down together, ordering, all the while making the kinds of conversation that foster connection, support, and care. Do you get this? We have all experienced it, but we might imagine it is just a sort of golden glow that Flint inhabits, rather than the expression of a certain intention that can guide our attention, and therefore every word, thought, and action becomes coherent, meaningful, and in the service of the intention. What would it be like to live a life this way?

Preparation. Big surprise, they decided they wanted Flint to give a talk. No, they didn't want a talk, they wanted him to give the audience an *experience*. They wanted to bring him home, they wanted to marry him, they forgot they *were* married, I think.

This is the funny part. Flint was a sea of confusion in response to this invitation. What should he say? How could he convey the heart of what we are doing in 18 minutes? And this is where it gets interesting, because throughout the whole long preparation process, Flint concentrated entirely on his intention: to provide, for himself and others, the experience of freedom, of intimacy, of connection, and his *method* was appamada—mindful, energetic care.

He began by meticulously researching and taking notes on the most successful, most emailed, most highly rated talks on TED and from last year's TEDx Austin event. He watched them numerous times. He thought about what made those talks stand out. He came to some insights about that that helped him think about his own talk, about the right mix of the personal and the informational that would be needed by that particular audience. He began to create a structure, the first fumbling attempts to capture meaning in the net of words and actions. This was a period of frustration for him, as he confronted the constraints of time, the requirements of the TEDx organizers, the limits of what he could see. It would be hard to overstate the many hours this took, the number of times he revisited the TED talks that he felt were most moving and helpful, the mind maps and notes and the quotes he gathered from books and articles.

Always, in his conversations with me about it, he focused on the kind of experience he wanted to bring to the audience, the potential for them to, even for such a brief time, embody the freedom and connection and care that is always available to them, always present in this moment.

He looked at thousands of stock photos for his presentation slides and turned against them, finally, in favor of less professional, but more intimate, personal images of his own. Authenticity was absolute in this presentation.

Self-compassion. But he not only prepared in these professional ways, the ways any truly accomplished speaker might prepare. He took very good care of himself as he navigated all the complex requests and demands arising in the situation: for slides in advance, for meetings, rehearsals, technological development. How did he do this? What else? He went shopping. And this was something really telling, for me.

He bought two shirts and a jacket. Astounding, isn't it? *Two shirts?* You can only wear one shirt to give a talk. But of course, there was a dinner for speakers the evening before, as well. So yes, two shirts. And a jacket. Why? Doesn't Flint have plenty of shirts, and jackets as well? Of course he does, and he could have gone to his closet and simply taken out any one of them to be impeccably attired on the TEDx stage.

Why did he give *this* shopping his care and attention, when he was so busy preparing for this talk, not to mention continuing to see his clients, give retreats, and lead inquiry here? Because he had a certain intention for *how he would feel* being fully present at the very moment of his talk, if he were at his *absolute best*. *He knows himself well enough to know that clothing matters to his sense of well-being.*

I'll tell you another secret (although since this is being recorded, it won't be much of a secret now), the day before the talk, what do you imagine Flint did? No, it is not more rehearsing, it is something that might not automatically occur to you: he had a facial. Why? Because video is a pretty unforgiving medium, because the lights on the stage were extremely bright, because he is a little vain about his appearance? All of those are true to some extent. But the real reason has to do with his intention for his own experience, of taking good care of himself, of relaxing and settling himself in preparation to deliver his very best. And then before the speakers' dinner, he and Erin sat across the street from the

Austin Music Hall and had a glass of champagne. Who does this? Who realizes that even in the midst of all the stress of preparing, you need to be very caring to the one who is going to be doing the work—yourself? And of course your partner!

He set an intention to make warm deep connections with every single person he encountered throughout this experience of giving an 18-minute talk at TED, and my observation is that this is exactly what happened. The rehearsals were daunting, and he continued to fine-tune his talk, rehearsing it time and again with Margaret Keys, one of our sangha members who has been doing this kind of coaching professionally for many years. Yet he didn't want it to be a canned talk: it needed aliveness, freshness, connection, for it to awaken the audience, not dazzle them. He had to embody what he was talking about.

He drew on his network of resources fully, bouncing ideas off me, working with Margaret diligently and with care. It's safe to say that even though there were lots of challenges he met them with grace and the full attention of his intention. (The TEDx folks were extremely anxious about Flint speaking while seated on his cushion, but he was quite sure about it and when he showed them the difference in rehearsal, they were stunned.)

Only Flint would think about bringing the raised platform from the Austin Zen Center, so that this seated performance would carry the dignity of our practice in the best way.

Appamada.

Of course he had a wonderful talk mapped out. But the night before the presentation he awoke at 2:15 AM, anxious about something that didn't feel quite right. As he described it to me, throughout the preparations he had focused on how to provide this experience for the audience, but there was still something lacking. And at 3:00 he had figured it out, and he made a shift in the presentation that fully satisfied him, that he was bringing himself into the presentation with his own integrity, not merely talking to satisfy the audience. The wholehearted way.

This is how attention is fully shaped by intention, how we consciously live the lives we choose to live, and create, rather than simply react to the conditions that arise in our lives. And in this way we become truly free, no matter what circumstances we face. Was Flint nervous? Did he doubt himself? Did he wonder what he had gotten himself into? Did he

feel overwhelmed at times? Yes, certainly all of these things arose. But because he was aligned with his intention, he did not allow these forms of distress to hijack his attention. He did not ignore them, and he did not indulge them. He acknowledged them and returned to his intention.

So we might be inspired, too, to consider whether we might *pause* in the face of any situation, *reflect* on our intention, and *connect* our attention in thoughts, words, and actions to that intention so that we, together with all beings may be free. We are not merely passengers, passively accepting “things as it is,” we engage in unconditional, wholehearted participation in life in absolute accord with our intention.

And this was the teaching of my teacher, for which I have boundless gratitude.