

# 2004-05-03 Choices

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## SPEAKERS

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There are many different ways of looking at Buddhist practice. dividing it up in a sense, classic one is to look at it this as two wings, wisdom and compassion. I'd like to divide it up or look at it from two different perspectives today that have to get closer, you know, to mindfulness practice, maybe two, so you could say maybe two sides of mindfulness practice. And the first side is mindfulness itself. And that's certainly emphasized a lot in our circles. And it's, you know, kind of the name of the game for people who practice mindfulness is to be mindful. And there's a lot of benefits to mindfulness as a lot of power that comes from it. It's a lot of protection that comes from it. There's a mindfulness itself is kind of a refuge for people. I'd say. It's something That provides tremendous can provide tremendous joy. It can provide a sense of being at home. It can provide peace. It could give a lot of, you know, understanding. Mindfulness has a lot of benefits Lothar does. And it's been said sometimes that everything you need to know about Buddhism can be known through your own powers of observation. And being carefully mindful. You don't have to read any books about Buddhism used to do pay careful attention. But usually the books help because they show you better how to pay attention. The other side of the practice or the aspect is so important that kind of give it almost equal weight to mindfulness is that of making choices. So sorry to make wise choices about how we live our lives and what we do. And it could be, occasionally someone will come to me and say, I've been practicing mindfulness for a while. And I've gotten mindful. You know, I've seen that I'd be here in the present moment pretty well. And, you know, I don't seem to, you know, now what? And you know, it's a quite, quite an accomplishment to really arrive well in the present moment. Probably some of you have tried it and found a challenging occasionally. That, you know, the mind has a very strong tendency to not be in the present moment, to not really be here the lived moment, but rather to be in a conceptual moment to be in, in the future moments, planning and thinking, anticipating the future, or past moments, rehearsing them and reviewing them, improving on them. In many ways, should we relate to the past or sometimes We're in fantasy. And the mind has a very strong tendency to kind of get off the present moment. And it's really beautiful to kind of arrive in the present moment. But part of the purpose of really arriving in the present, being mindful, being here carefully in the present moment is to discover

the place, the locus of where we have choice. And if you don't see that you have choice in a situation, then you essentially don't have any choice. And the more mindful you are, the more calm the mind is, the more choice you can actually see. A comma mind is a mind that sees a lot of things that that an agitated mind cannot. Suzuki Roshi, once said is said that if you want to see virtue in people have a calm mind. It's been said that the tradition that in the British tradition I think, if the mind is pure, all things are pure. If you kind of get yourself mindful and calm and centered, then you see things you can see if you're agitated. And so the emphasis to that tonight is if you can see, the place where you can make choices, the choices you make are consequential. They're important. Occasionally there are people have kind of a naive hours kind of attitude about Buddhist practice, that is just kind of to be in the present moment and just go with the flow. And you know, kind of, there's no self, there's no choices, there's no intentions, something just kind of operates through us and we just kind of ride the wonderful way. And we just know have what we know we know what to do, which is no real choice. It just kind of comes out of us. It's all really great. And that's nice, if it happens that way. But I would argue that in the teachings of the Buddha,

he put a tremendous emphasis on develop thing our capacity to choose wisely. And to think of it kind of like a muscle that can get weak, or you can build up with it becomes strong. And you find yourself in some situations and you see that you have a choice to go one direction or the other. And you have the strength to be able to choose the wise way to go and stand in front of the ice cream parlor and see that you have a choice there and choose the choices wise for you. Some people I know don't have a choice. They just start walking down the street with ice cream in their hand. And had that happen. Or you have a conversation with someone you're close to how that happened. And I said that. Wow, you afterwards you say I wish I had seen where the choice was? Because I really blew it in what I said. But if you're common of the conversation, you'll see ahead of time or here's I have a choice of whether to tell my friend, he's a jerk and it's wise to see that moment of choice. And you're harried, and with a default inherited life and difficult life and all these things, sometimes it's, you know, we don't want to take the time to see the choice, we'd rather be Taoist to kind of just kind of let it kind of spit it out of us, you know, you know, good, lousy. So to be in the present moment to become in the present moment, gives us a lot of power. Because in many ways, one of the powers gives us It shows us where the choice is. And then it's important to start exercising it for a number of reasons. One reason is that we can exercise it and make wiser choices. And those wiser choices can lead to a better life. The other reason is that, as we exercise our choice, we strengthen that muscle becomes a strength, we develop a strength. And so you go into more and more difficult situations. And you carry that strength with you. You know, your entire situation is very tempting. And you have the strength say, Oh, I don't think I need to do that. You, or this is what I'm going to do, I'm going to do this X, Y, and Z. As we're mindful of the place of choice, we can also start seeing some of the things that influence the choices we normally make. And that's very fascinating and very important to see what makes us tick. So for example, for you know, we know for a long time when I was in the monastery, then monastery, I got to see very carefully very well and very painfully, how much I wanted to be liked by people. And that I was making choices about the things I said how I did what I did, based on my hope that what I did will influence people to like me. Now it's okay to be like, there's nothing wrong with that. But, but you can

be neurotic about that. And I was and so I got to see it kind of in my face, but like a common often got enough, you know, for various reasons. I could see it. And then I could see Oh, when I saw it, then I started having a choice about it. If I didn't see it, And it was operating kind of subconsciously, there was no choice. But as I got calm enough and quiet enough and centered enough in the present, I could see the places of choice. And it became kind of a tug for me kind of difficult. I could see it, but it was so, you know, was so important to get people to like me, I mean, what's gonna happen if they don't? I mean, you know, just, they might not like me, and, you know, that'd be terrible, and they'll reject me and it'll have to leave or I'll die or some dire thing will happen. I wasn't quite sure what was going to happen. But, but, you know, I could feel my fear, my anxiety, my concerns, my projections, my fantasies about the future, what would what it would mean if people didn't like me, and that would come in, you know, I feel the struggle as I was trying to find my way to have a wise choice. I could see I don't really need to have this I don't, it doesn't feel good to be carry, carry with me the sense of wanting to be liked. What am I trying not doing well let go of it. And so It was kind of a struggle with that though. What do I do here? We let go of it Do I now live a different way that will let people think that I'm a jerk. And, and I learned in the monastery sometimes as well, one point I learned that when I was managing the kitchen, the kitchen actually function functions a lot better if I wasn't so concerned about people liking me. But if I tried to get everybody to like me in the kitchen, I had to tie myself in knots, you know, to please everybody. So just sort of exercising the choice and facing up to some of the reasons why it's difficult to make wise choices to really understand that. Today, I was looking at some words by Suzuki Roshi. And he said there's no wrong there's only deepening your understanding. Sometimes our understanding is not very deep.

And, and my job is to is when I see that you're you're just He's not not very deep, or it's one sided, then my job is to help make help point you to a deeper understanding. But there's no wrong. That's great. You're not wrong, but maybe your understanding is not so deep. And so how do you get to a deeper understanding? How do you get more deeply into the present moment, you can see, you know, what's really going on there? And what is wise about making the choices you have to do? We're making choices all the time anyway. I mean, we're making choices every second all the time. And if you have an itch, and you choose to, you know, scratch your cheek, that's a choice that you make. And we all think about that, because we're not paying attention so carefully. We think that's kind of automatic. But there's always these little choices are going on. And, and what practice is wants to do is to highlight partly the choices you're always making, so that you can see if there are other choices that you want to make. When I came back from the Zen monitor. After living there almost three years there in some ways, there were a lot of choices made for us. Much of our day was choreographed, how you stood, how you sat, or you ate, how you chanted all kinds of things where you kind of what you did with your body. And when I left the monastery, back into kind of regular life, life wasn't so choreographed in the same way as it wasn't a monastery. And but because it wasn't coming from the monastery, I was much more, much more constantly consciously aware of all these choices I have to make now on my own, and something as simple and innocent as how to sit in a chair. I realized after being three years in a monastery was a choice. Before going to the monastery never occurred to me. I had a choice. Now as I sat in the chair, I just said, when you sit you sit the things that you need to eat,

but there's kind of naive because I would just sit without thinking about it. But nothing more so I could I could slump I could sit up straight I could sit different ways, and that there was a little bit consequences depending how I sat, my energy change, my presence changed certain kinds of ways of sitting, had different consequences in other ways. And I could start choosing about that. Now, some people hearing this, or irritated because to imply that spiritual practice involves taking responsibility for your choices, is a drag. I mean, isn't it very clear of spirituality just it was just all about radical total, you know, acceptance by the universe of you. And you're just completely fine and wonderful. And you can just rest. And that's it. And they'll be great. And for some people, mindfulness has that quality. And it's really wonderful that sometimes mindfulness itself has this non judgmental quality to it. So to kind of rest in a kind of awareness of yourself as non judgmental, can be very healing for people and very helpful There are choices we make all the time. So part of Dharma practice is to look at those understand them. And then see is there wiser ways that we can exercise those choices? further, I thought about talking about this because I was in Vancouver this weekend. And there was a kind of a store that I drove by a couple of times. And that was kind of like maybe like a Whole Foods kind of store. And the name of the store was choices. Another that I thought was kind of odd. But over on my year, because, you know, there's a go into some of these stores in America, you know, around, there's so many choices, that they have cartoons, right, that you go into a store and you ask for x and you wanted with with a and b or you wanted the big size of ball size, or do you want, you know, and you have to make all these choices, because you can just go and grab, you know, a bar of soap, there's all these different choices. You have to make between different bars. And then you have different people in your family and they need, you know, everyone needs their own kind, you know, and so you have to kind of know, the individual choices everybody has to make. And there's just so many choices. And you go some places, like, outside of California sometimes or you know, for some places, and they don't have the choices you're used to. I mean, you go places and they don't have anything but regular milk. I mean, how primitive you know, what about the 1%, the 2%, the nonfat, the lactose free, the lactase filled whatever, you know, there's, you know, and, and then there's keefer, renders all these different things you can get, it just it's amazing what you can get in California in terms of choices. The world has never seen a society that has as many choices as we have. No wonder we're depressed.

I mean, who can who can sort through Apollo at all? But it's a lot. So historical choices, life is choice. It's been called life choices, series of choices you make. So there's a quote by the Buddha that goes, whatever is thought about and reflected on frequently becomes the inclination of the heart. inclination of the mind, heart and mind is same word. Whatever you think about a lot, becomes the disposition or the inclination, where the mind wants to go with a heart wants to go. I think it's a very, very important teaching. Because it points to that, again, the choices we make is important and how we live our lives, how we think something so primary to us, even how I think let alone how we we speak what we speak about, how we behave, has consequences. And one of the consequences is a creates a certain disposition in our hearts certain inclination. In our hearts, if you spend a lot of time, you might have very good reasons to grind, very justified and it's really very, very justified reasons why people have to hear your gripes we spend a lot of time doing that there becomes kind of a leaning in the mind, a tendency towards it couldn't be easier to grow up in the future, as the conductor with this chorus kind

of saying, or he spent a lot of time being kind, it becomes a bit easier for you, you can leaning in that direction to be kind. So what what we do doesn't just exist in and of itself at that moment, but it kind of puts a little spin on our hearts and kind of nudges in certain kind of direction. If you do something repeatedly, that the meaning becomes more severe, stronger. So in the teachings of the Buddha, the instructions or take some responsibility for the dispositions for how your heart is disposed. You don't have to take the hearts dispositions, the hearts inclination, as a given if you're born this way, and this is the way it is, it's going to be that way forever. But actually, you can shape and change your disposition disposition, your inclination, your, the, the, the, the tendency are the thoughts, the reactions, the way you tend to respond in different situations, by living and choosing in the present, wise ways of living, or unwise ways, whatever way you want to go. And, as I say, often, if you don't take responsibility, for your dispositions for the inclinations of your heart, for the shape of your thoughts, your motivations, your intentions, your choices, there's a lot of people in society who are paid a lot of money to do it for you to shape your mind for you. And there's people who are very good at that. And also, it isn't just other people Wanting to influence you. But isn't there a certain kind of tendency, I've noticed that just just being in certain cultures and certain values will shape or influence our mind, in certain ways create a certain disposition for us. And 100 was kind of a kind of poignant kind of lesson is for me was that when I came to Palo Alto in 1990, I had a beat up old Toyota. And I was very content. And I beat up old Toyota. And where I come from, and, you know, living in San Francisco, so electromagnetic living in San Francisco, lived there for a few more years, which came down here a lot to school and to teach. And up there, there were a lot of beautiful cars, I was just kind of I didn't feel like I was unusual. I drove that car around for quite a while down here and but, but four or five years, I noticed that I was doing more and more in Palo Alto. I started noticing that my car was one of the older ones. So that's an interesting observation. It's a, it's a reasonable observation to make, you know, if you're observant, you notice things like that. But then I noticed that it actually, I started noticing other things came with that. Oh, I wonder, this is, you know, maybe people are judging me a little bit. Maybe think I'm kind of like, you know, not good enough. You know, there's a lot of other people in politics, you know, most people a lot newer cars, and I had, you know, cars with one or two years old or whatever, and, and, you know, and, you know, a little bit odd man out here, having this old car and, you know, it'd be good to have a good car, a new car. If I had a newer car, it'd be good, you know, to have it, you know, and then not 15 more or whatever, you know, it's very, very subtle. I know exactly what exactly the thoughts that went in my mind. But I could see myself starting to starting to have these new core thoughts.

And I was being influenced by that environment around me and other environments with which influenced me in other ways about cars. So the dispositions that we know it's kind of like a disposition or inclination that was being created in my mind. And, and the more I thought about it, the more I think about those caught by those, the more I'm likely to follow up on that. I met and this weekend who loved lovely man who because of the difficult financial difficulties in the province, I guess of Vancouver, British Columbia wasn't able to do the work in the hospital where he loves to work. And so you're taking a job in a voting store and he was okay we're, you know, sometimes but there were a lot of really wealthy people who came in and bought like boats there were over a million dollars. So boats,



and they'd have these boats, you know, decked out he said, with two bathrooms and DVDs and each little, you know, the room they had and all This isn't stuff he said they were really kind of decked out very opposite boats. And what he would amaze them was this people have had all this wealth and all these wealthy but all this stuff would get bent out of shape. Because they didn't have something middle thing for the boat. They didn't have a DVD player for the bathroom, or whatever, he knows something. And they would get bent out of place or a friend of mine and so in Los Angeles, who is a psycho economist and he's and he's, he's a, he's a psychologist for wealthy people who who are who suffer because of their money. This is kind of a, you know, a niche market. And he told me about people who are clients of yours have had, you know, \$50 million, and we're really worried they didn't have enough money. And so, you know, they realized they had a problem. So they would You know, go to him. So you know what we know. So, you know, disposition of the mind, you know, it's it's so shapeable the mind and by the environment by all kinds of conditions and what's frequently thought about becomes an inclination of the heart. So this teaching about looking at the places we have choice also becomes looking at how we shaped the inclination of the heart. What kind of the default? what's the what's good? What's the default way that your mind your heart, responds to the world around you? Do you just accept the default as it is? Or do you feel that actually you can change it? To Buddhism says you can. You might not be able to change it in big ways or some fundamental things. Maybe you can't change. But I saw but I like this expression, inclination. You kind of incline it in one direction, maybe all kinds of things arise with you inclining it in certain kind of way. Maybe you're inclined to say no a lot. If that's all you develop a veto power, you know, all kinds of things bubble up in your mind thoughts ideas, and you see it, they say, wow, you know, I don't think I could pick that up. I don't think I need to say that. And that becomes an inclination of the heart, the inclination to say, no. Oh, no, thank you. I don't need to spread rumors anymore. I don't think I will anymore. You might feel the inclination to say rumors But no, no thanks. And in the development as a string, so that that kind of know, feels like a relief, rather than a burden. That kind of know, frees the mind, rather than puts a little kind of limitation on it. Wouldn't it be great? Do you have some sense that it good no like that can free you rather than Be a burden. I hope you do. So some one choice that we make in practice is when not to exercise choice, when to kind of just get out of the way, when you just sit mindfully, just just be mindful and present for how things are, and not try to change anything, just let it kind of be. And that's a very, very valid way of being, but it's also a choice. The choice is kind of like global choice except being present. And sometimes that is a really good thing to do. And other times, you want to exercise your choice in other ways more actively and more clearly. Anyway, that's probably enough. I should actually exercise my veto power here. And the

so my encouragement for you this week, is that you kind of look more carefully the choices you make, and see if you can be sensitive to choices. As you make you heard that you hadn't haven't really realized, that you've made or you don't really think about, maybe you can ask a friend to kind of point something out to you. You see, you've made a choice here. Oh, I guess I did. Do what you can to look at choices. And then I don't know, and then see if you can start being discerning or, or, or curious about how choices, how operating in the realm of choices in a responsible way, can make you feel lighter, and happier, and more joyful, more loving. If you can't actually feel that way, at least you can

leaning in that direction, leaning to becoming freer and happier and more joyful. So that's your homework. So now it's your turn. We have 10 minutes if you'd like to ask questions or comments or testimonials about choices reservations. Protests. Yes.

I bought a new car. Yes. I bought a little Honda Civic. Oh, it was like a silver bullet. It was great. I felt so hot. zipping through Palo Alto. I'll show them my little civic.

This may or may not really, but it was really discussed

Bring the news. Yeah.

I wasn't feeling

compassion, forgiveness.

I guess I'm looking for some work. So the question is that she said she was quite depressed about the stories coming out of Iraq of prisoners being abused. And and, you know, where does she find your compassion? Where did she find her forgiveness? How does she work with the difficult feelings she's feeling The depressive feeling she feels in reading this, that this happens. And that's a great question. And sometimes place to start this with oneself. If you're feeling terribly depressed and angry and upset, I think having some forgiveness, some acceptance of yourself in that state is a very important place to begin. So that you're not beating yourself up or kind of making it worse for yourself for being that way. Sometimes being very accepting of how we're feeling is the beginning of knowing or finding how to relate to these in the wise way and maybe finding how to massage it and work with it and explore it. Sometimes when we're really deeply troubled by what goes on in the world around us, in ways that are debilitating to us, then sometimes the best thing to do is to turn around and bring the attention back to oneself, trying to understand really well the fear or The anger that we're carrying. Because probably the fear of something, if we're really debilitated by it, probably the fear and angry feeling is not being very useful or helpful or even appropriate for the situation. I'm not going to say that it's inappropriate to have anger or fear. But if we're debilitated by it, then I suggest is to go inside. That's one place very important to do. Another another important area in this kind of situation is it can be very depressing, very difficult. If people feel like they have no power in a situation do anything. So feeling helplessness is very debilitating can add to this, you know, there's just terrible things going on, but I'm hopeless, help us, you know, help us in dealing with or doing anything with it. And in some sense, you know, that far away, we don't have that much we can do with it distance. But it's very, very important that we feel that we know that the greater the greater the tragedy integrators impacts are psyche, our hearts, the more important I feel it is that we also have to do something in response to it, find something to do, whether it's writing a letter to a senator or somewhere or going to a protest, or, you know, whatever it is, you know, wherever seems appropriate, it could be very small. It doesn't have to be even even directly related to this particular incident. It can be inspired by that. But, you

know, I'm going to go you know, work for an abuse hotline for the in this country so that to help people here in this country, or send some money to some people who work with victims of abuse or something, but to actually be able to act and feel like you're actually doing something in the direction of trying to deal deal with this thing is being impacted you I think is very important. So we don't feel stuck in being helpless. The feelings that come from that

big part of it and, and having the ability to not respond is a really important part of this. So, you know if the idea of making choices and take responsibility seems a little bit difficult or premature. The kind of the first step to that in meditation especially, but also outside is learning learning not to not to respond first. Let go and just let it be let things be before you don't have to act on it or respond to do anything. Just let it be for a while. Sometimes we're letting things be understand all kinds of understanding intuitions and things can arise. That gives us more sense. But if we act right away, the first choice that comes up or a second, whatever, sometimes that's, you know, premature learning, the ability not to respond is a very important part of practice. And if you, I mean, it's often true in conversations, right? Or in many situations in life, that a lot of wonderful things could happen if we just pause a little bit.

choices. Right now

I agree completely. So as this this is the world of choice, also is, is part of part of making choices to understand really well, the consequences of the choices we make, and the choices we make. The consequences don't just happen immediately in our psyche don't just just you know, personal for our own hearts, but there are consequences that spill out beyond us. You know, what, what we choose to buy, you know, there's a, there's a one of the things that frightens me about what's happening in many, many countries, especially here in America is this tremendous drive to have Cheap goods. And so the kind of Walmart decision of the world where it's great, you know, sometimes it's nice to be able to buy things cheaply. You know, it's all quite, you know, there's there certainly, there's a nice, nice aspect about that. But the consequences that if you buy something at Walmart, then you're supporting situation where people are not getting benefits, very good benefits compared to what they used to have in concert, so there's kind of like a kind of marginalizing more more people in our society. So I went, I went recently to buy a friend of mine, and flashlight. He wanted a special kind of flashlight. So I went took him to Rei. And I thought, Oh, you know, I probably could have gotten this far cheaper. Maybe they added a target. But it's good right to buy things cheaper. But if I buy a target, everybody, I think I'm supporting testimony. Money supports a healthier work environment, people who work there. So my choices have consequences spill out. And so the question is, what are the externalities that we're willing to take into account? And so, when things happen in our name abroad, you know, after after 911, I was, there was a lot of Americans who said, How could this have happened? How could the world hate us so much back then. And they've been many people have lived kind of an insular life hadn't been aware of consequences and things have been done in the name of America for for decades, years, centuries. They thought that America was just all about the Peace Corps sending



people abroad to help. So I agree with you. So choices involve looking carefully at the wider situation. And then it gets complicated when you try to understand the wider situation

Particularly

to understand, compassionate motion.

Yes, they were very well said. There's actually a meditation practice in Buddhism, called equanimity practice, where you actually say a phrase, other people make the make their own choices. I might, I might wish that person all the best, but I'm not. I'm not responsible for that person's choices. That person makes their own choices. That's considered very kind of wise for me to realize and let people make their own life. But realize other people make their own choices, and that you're not responsible with the choices they make. I'm just trying to learn that with my six year old.

Just you know, as a kind of summary, you know, tending to your dispositions tending to your heart, and taking responsibility for it. And beginning to cultivate a heart that expresses generosity and love, compassion, peace is one of the things the world most needs. And so it starts with you. So I hope that this wonderful pairing of mindfulness, and choice is for your benefit, and for the benefit of all. Thank you very much.