

2004-12-20 Lights in the Darkness

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SPEAKERS

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Thinking about this evening and giving a talk this evening I was thinking about how close it is to solstice. This is the darkest time of the year. And it's kind of dark in here this evening. I mean, that's good, which turned down even more. And I meant to bring a candle I have a candle, just for the. So I want to what I'd like to do is try to do for you is to give you a little thoughts I have about or associations I have with this particular time of the year in Buddhism, Buddhist practice. You know, it's a time for many, many cultures. They're called the darkest time of the year is a time to celebrate light fest light festivals. You go around the cities you always people have lights on their houses they don't usually have and some people have liked Christmas trees and have candles are like as a candle celebration. And you know, the idea of celebrating life dividing the light back being reminded now things will start getting lighter again opening up. The there was a choice made, I don't know when 200 years ago to translate the Buddhist word, Bodhi, by the English term enlightenment. And scholars have tended to kind of pull the hair out that talking about that what a terrible choice that was. Big partly because enlightenment, the associations that that you went to years ago when they, when they pluck this word out of the English language was with enlightenment period of European history and philosophy. And Buddhism has nothing to do with that. And so it's kind of a strange Association. The, the word Bodhi literally means awake to be awakened. And so has kind of different associations and enlightenment. Sometimes when you have the idea of enlightenment, as the point, some people have the idea of this light bulb going off in their head like this great Aha, you know this, you know, The Big Bang Theory of enlightenment, that you know, just the lights go off or on or something that even though scholars sometimes you know, feel a little bit, there was a bit off to chosen this word enlightenment. There is certainly are references in Buddhism to light and, and so I want to just touch on a few of them. One of the more famous ones, is the idea that each practitioner is to be a light onto him or herself, refuge onto him or herself, that somehow we can be our own light and light find our way the darkness, that we can be our own inspiration, that we can be our own source of awakening. When image and bring is that of a dark room and, and as soon as you turn on a light in the room, the darkness vanishes or a single candle can kind of dispel a lot of the darkness in the room. So to be our own light is to kind of turn on or around something which casts clarity or casts a certain level of freedom or ease or peace onto whatever experiences and so when the Buddha said be a light on to yourself, he was saying that you should be the source of finding this kind of piece you should you should you should find within yourself the resources for bringing clarity bring peacefulness bring freedom to your own heart and to your own mind. And that's somewhat different from religious traditions that look outside of oneself, for inspiration for refuge for guidance for what's sacred or something in Buddhism, the focuses you look within. There's a contrast that sometimes made between the beginning of the, of the Old Testament, the Bible and, and the beginning of the Buddhist canon, the Buddhist Bible, verse by but there is no Buddhist beginning of Buddhist Bible, it doesn't have a clear beginning like it doesn't in Christianity or Judaism. But the beginning of the Buddhist canon, if there's is one is sometimes attributed to the first verses of

the Dhammapada. And there it says, The mind is the forerunner of all things. For interval experience, our experience, our mind, our quality of our mind, things are led by mind made by mind

going to it, the importance of the mind comes first and foremost in the Buddhist tradition. This stands quite in contrast, except for the Bible, where the opening verses or lines have to do with the importance of God as the Creator. So in a sense, Buddhism looks at the mind as being the Creator of all things kind of in a Buddhist kind of way of understanding that, whereas the Bible understands that God is Creator of all things. So when the Buddha says Be a light on to yourself, it's a very strong statement is that which is most important in Buddhism is not to be found outside, but somehow to be found in our own hearts in our own minds. So to be a light on to oneself.

I want to tell a couple of stories that come from the Mahayana tradition from a text called the Lotus Sutra. And the first is a story of a wayward son. There was this father and son, who were wandering around the world and at some point they got separated. Maybe they went in different paths they reach finding are looking for their fortune, perhaps. And the father settled down into town and became a merchant, I think and became very successful and eventually became quite wealthy and had a big mansion or house or state, and continued with his affairs. And the son wandered around the world for a long time, ending up being quite destitute and homeless, without any money, ragged beggar, and it is poor, poor state. He became quite I don't know if delirious is the right word, crazed, kind of lost himself and were felt very, very unworthy, very inadequate. And then one day in the son's wandering around the world. He came to the town where his father lived. And his father saw his son recognize them even though he was in rags and disabled. But the son didn't recognize the Father. So the son ran out first and said, Oh, hello, wait. And when the father came running out, the son got frightened. Who's this guy running after me? So this so the father realized what was going on. So he didn't introduce himself as the Father. He said, Oh, and so what he did, his father went back into his grounds. And he sent out to one of his servants and as a servant to ask the son if he would be willing to do some menial work, to shovel manure in the stables. And the son said, Oh boy, I'm so lucky because I have no money and have no food and certainly I can do that I can shovel shit. And so he comes in and spends the day shoveling in the stables. And, and it's these couple minutes for how well they do the job. And he's asked if he wants a steady job doing this and perhaps a little room in that side of the stable. He's very grateful for this. And he stays and he works hard for quite a long time. And then he gets promoted, at some point to be a gardener. He gets to be closer to the house and becomes the head gardener and has a lot to do with a father who kind of directs the garden, what's to be done, and they develop quite a good rapport. And then eventually, the father says, oh, would you come in and help us in the house here, I need someone to help me with a secretary, someone to help me with my affairs much more closely. And the son does that. Then the father trusts him with the keys of both then all the secrets of the business and everything and, and, and at some point, you know, all the Father Father Knows has been entrusted to the son even though the son doesn't know who he is, yet. And then at some point when the trust is there and everything, the son has a lot of confidence in himself. He's already destitute and disheveled. The father says, Oh, and by the way, we tell you something, you are my son. And it turns out this all this is yours. And so,

so that goes together with another story, in the same situation.

What happened? Is it like a story. The point the point of the story is that each of us, each of us, has, in some ways, forgotten who we are. And spiritual practice, and from this point of view, is remembering who we are. But the unfortunate thing is that for most of us, we won't believe it. Go running away or something. And so it takes a long time. Sometimes you have to shovel shovel shovel shit for a while. And you have to you know, get some confidence there. And, and then slowly you can kind of find out.

And finally, finally, when you have a lot of confidence and self assurance, finally get the point find out who you are. The second story is a little bit similar to this is a story of two men who I think are also travelers. I don't. I don't remember all the details of the story. And more one of the men is sleeping. The second one sneaks over to him to his coat and into the lining of his coat someplace. He sews or hides in a precious jewel. Expensive jewel. It doesn't tell them you sorted in And then they parkways for a long time and the one that has this hidden jewel and his coat ends up having a hard time and destitute and poor and all these terrible things, and he wanders around and eventually they hook up again and the man with a judo says you know I've had a hard life and the second was Oh, but you know he's just looking your coat you have it right there you know he looks opens up tears open his coat and there he has this jewel I carry with him all the time all the time. You know, it was worth all you know, he could have been a wealthy man so he the same kind of idea that there's a the each of us has this jewel inside of ourselves. So we don't know is there because we don't know it's no, it's there. We wander around and kind of lost and pour spiritually for it. Some Buddhists will love this story. And some Buddhists don't like it at all. And the ones who don't like it the ones who like it, don't like it department variety of reasons why but one reason is, they almost see it as a metaphysical principle, that somehow innately, we are a Buddha or in a clay, there's some kind of wonderful purity or innate perfection or something within us. The people who don't like it, don't like it, because it's a metaphysical principle. And how are you going to know that for sure? Is it just an act of faith? Or how are you going to believe that or is it really true? How can it be? Is it really true? Is there such a thing inside of us? We'd like to believe it's kind of inspiring, isn't it? If we believe it's true, we probably act differently. And then it becomes true after a while. If we don't believe it's true, then I don't know Maybe we practice and practice and then we discover something comparable to it. I think that the inner life is a kind of there's a lot of ambiguity in the inner life in a human sense of how to describe it, how to talk about it. And so it's very easy to kind of use different kinds of languages. Some people work for some people doesn't work for others. And they talk about what's innate, is, you know, as part of that, so, is there some innate Buddhahood or innate perfection within us, in and of itself? Or is it is their innate potential within us? And that potential is only actualized. If we act on it. Is there a difference between the two? Could these be seen as the same thing? Certainly, there's an innate potential. And that potential is what certainly most of Buddhism is pointing towards the innate potential. To wake up, whether that awakening is somehow in there deep inside, and just have to kind of clear all the gunk away from it. It's like a mirror, it's it's dusty. And so you can clear that clean up the mirror and then you see how beautiful the mirrors are whether you have to get the glass and the silver or whatever it is and, and kind of make the mirror. And then you have this beautiful mirror. You know, who knows what it is? It turns out that your practice is basically the same either way. However, the people who think that there's an innate mirror or innate perfection here, sometimes have an easier time. Because they have this

this confidence then that there's something really beautiful that's right here, as opposed to something that has to be worked for and attained and struggled for.

So to be a light on to themselves is it to be ones Light? Is it to make a light to create a light to create clarity to create confusion in our minds? Or is it really to recognize what's already there to recognize the innate purity of our awareness, the innate purity of our hearts or something? I don't know. I you know, so that when some days I fall on one side and some days I fall on the other side of that divide, and which, you know, the so I was a spirit rock last few days. And I was quite inspired by one of the caretakers up there. The caretakers, someone that cares for things and he cares for the land, the building and all the retweets that come there and he, he is basically a service job he doesn't get. It gets a small stipend. It gets women board room in a small little will minute trailer. He gets a small stipend and he works Part time. And his inspiration is to be of service. He's done this at IMS in other places. And there's one of them just really, this is what he loves to do with his life. And I found out this weekend

that he is one, probably the numbers a little bit higher. Now this was the became some years ago but as a few years ago, years ago, he was one of 239 people in United States who donated their one of their kidneys to perfect strangers. That's something it's one thing to offer it to your relatives, someone you know, or a friend, but to he went to someplace or hospitals that I would like to donate my kidney. And I think they first said he can't do that. Unless, you know someone wants you to help somebody someone needs to watch your kidney, kidney. And so he went and talked to his sister about that. And a sister was part of a church and in the church, they knew there was a woman there who was going to die. If she didn't get a kidney soon, So through that connection then and then before the transplant happened, his sister died. And so then he was even more inspired to give the kidney because it was partly in memory of her sister. And so and so then this person had I don't know how they became met each other enough, but he was one of the 239 people who had the kind of generosity of heart I would think they care to offer this very precious part of our of our body to someone else, a perfect stranger in order to save someone's else lives, it's a beautiful thing when you do that, because because there's just a really long list of people on the kidney transplant waiting list. And some of those people, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds, maybe thousands, and some of those people are never gonna get to the top. So if you donate a kidney to someone near the top, it allows someone below them to move up. You know, So you might want to save The life of the person you gave a kidney to, maybe that person just ticks down the list, their life was saved, maybe a lot of them were saved depending on how far off they got the list. So, I say this story because when I think about this man now at spirit rock, he, he kind of represents a shining light for me. And it kind of brighten my day I felt a lightened up by by it. And there are people that I know who stand out as lights for me, beacons for me, as inspirations for me. Their behavior, their practice, their generosity, their compassion, somehow, really, right. This my day inspires me tremendously. In the teachings of the Buddha, he said, even a new practitioner, who practices sincerely is a bright light in the world. That's strong. Stronger light and the light to the stars. Something like that is a quote, that even someone who's a new practitioner, if their practices sincere, is a bright light. So to be a light on once, to be a light for oneself, to be light on to oneself, then allows one to be a light onto others. It's a wonderful kind of reciprocity in that kind of approach. I think that learning to be a light on oneself, is this really crucial people? really crucial issue for a lot of people I've been talking to in recent months, especially after the election. There's a lot of despair and a lot of fear in a lot of people right now about among some people, not everyone, but among a lot of people about what's going on what they perceive is going on in this country. And

there may be good reasons to feel feel aroused and feel very concerned about many things going on. But the degree of fear. And that exists. I wonder sometimes where the fear arises, because we're looking too much externally for our own well being, and not taking enough responsibility for it well being from the inside out. To be a light on oneself and then let the light shine from within it outwards is take responsibility for the way that we get contracted, the way that we get afraid the way that we get angry, to take responsibility for ourselves such a degree, that it said that someone who takes refuge in their own light has no reason anymore to complain about the world. Now complete you, you might still feel that things are right in the world you might actually change things in the world. It doesn't mean that you accept things you know as they are, but to complain to Chris to blame the world to whale the whale against the world for Our individual condition we are.

So is that a sign of no is that anyway, the point being is someone who's taking refuge in this light within oneself has no reason to complain anymore, partly because they begin understanding where the dynamic is where the causality causal connections are, to their own suffering. It's in our own contractions, our own tightening our own clinging, our own resistance, our own greed that we suffer. That we, we in a sense, we become our own enemy. If we get angry, the Buddha said we do our enemies a favor and cause damage to ourselves or enemy could never done on his own. The enemy

doesn't make us angry. It's the way we choose to respond to the situation. So the possibility of settling back and being a light on to oneself and out of oneself is a message of, I would say tremendous hope and inspiration that Buddhism is pointing to. It's also a tremendous challenge. It's also sometimes a tremendous insult as children shrunk but God said that, you know, it's kind of all are many of the things we cherish things we hold on to. We have to question and maybe be challenged very deeply. If we're going to start taking responsibility here.

So in the darkest times, we light a candle. And a single candle can dispel all most lots of the darkness. So each of us, I'm sure, sooner or later, has or will experience darkness. And we'll come to situation that's very personally challenging on many different levels and many different ways. It said, some people believe that. I don't know if it's universally true, but certainly, often true. That many people who are on a spiritual quest spiritual life, sooner or later Later will encounter what can be called the dark night of the soul. And some people encounters encounter it before they even know they're in a spiritual life spiritual path. I think it was Carl youngest said by time a person is middle age 40 or 45, or something. All their issues are spiritual. I don't know but I spent like, approximately the quote. So then the question is, in this in the periods of darkness, do we light the candle? Do we? Do we realize that we have a candle to light? Do we have the courage or the strength or their tenacity or to light it? Do we begin practicing using our awareness? awareness is the candle is one of the candles Certainly, the key candle to user awareness, someone dedicated to the path of mindfulness will fall back on or rely on being mindful, first and foremost, in any challenging situation they find themselves in. So no matter what's going on, how difficult it is, What's going on here? Can I be present for this? Can I try to understand what's happening right now? Can I understand myself in relationship to what's happening right now? Can I bring light and clarity to all the different reactive forces within me my beliefs, my assumptions, my feelings, my emotions? Can I shine lights on that beacon shining the light of awareness on what's happening? The ability to shine light on awareness is the refuge in Buddhism, using our awareness, and to fall back on that, first and foremost, to use that light of awareness, to bring clarity to what's happening. And then to begin to do that in a persistent way. To follow through on that intention to follow through on that, not just once or twice, but to maintain it and continue it. So that our ability to be clear and awaken and present becomes a stronger and stronger force within us. Part of the advantage of doing that is that allows us then to follow through on other intentions that we might want to live our lives by. And one of the things people do in America is right after it starts getting more and more light. In this kind of mythical non reality of New Year's Eve, we've decided this arbitrary time to make new year's eve resolutions. And I've been told I've a friend who runs a health club in Menlo Park and he says it's the best time of year for him January If he has a poor January, he's in trouble for the rest of the year. So tired from making resolutions and intentions. And what I'd like to end by saying is that one of the lights within us that Buddhism focuses on his awareness itself is mindfulness. The other light is the goodness of our intentions of our motivations. And to fall back and take refuge on our good intentions are good motivations are skillful, healthy motivations is a really beautiful thing that shines light and brings clarity to this world. So rather than complaining about the world, do something about the world rather than complaining about the world. follow through on the bestest within you Rather than feeling

paralyzed by what's happening around us, be empowered by what's within you. And lets what's within you your good intentions, your good heart manifests itself in the world, so that you can be a light for the world. So you can be light for yourself and a light for the world. So as you go into this new part of the year where things get lighter, maybe reflect a little bit about your intentions, your resolves, and see and then exercise them, develop them, cultivate them, work on them. And I'm not suggesting that you should all go out and give your kidneys away. But that little story of my friend, spirit rock, I think is so inspiring someone would do that. And that was his intention. That was his compassion and motivation.

And he was he's a light in the world. So my hope is that each of you, each of you can be a light unto yourself and a light in the world.

Okay thank you so much