

2005-01-03 Responding to Suffering

Thu, 7/16 4:20PM • 35:40

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, world, retreat, response, earthquake, situation, practice, suffering, complaining, distress, respond, teachers, ability, thought, compassionate, sri lanka, feelings, evening, day, oxytocin

SPEAKERS

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What I've been wanting to do these last few years, is on the first days of teaching of the year is to give talks on the Four Noble Truths. And I had in mind all year that I was going to do that this Monday. But then, because of the earthquake in Indonesia, there was I had some thought that, you know, it's a huge event for the whole world. And remember, after 911, we had a several Sangha, gatherings, community gatherings, to discuss that or process that. And I know that they're in other Dharma groups around the bay area that I know about. A lot that had meetings last week. They somehow won one way or the other. I addressed the earthquake. And the impact of that. And in some ways, it's addressing the first noble truth, the truth of suffering. And so I thought I would talk about a little bit. I don't know how to talk about it, but I thought I'd talk a little bit and then we could have some discussion or we could have questions about something else or whatever. I found myself last Sunday morning, or Saturday afternoon, heading up to spirit rock to teach a week long retreat. And we just began to get wind of there was an earthquake and net, you know, several thousand people had been killed. And, and then that evening, we started this week long retreat. And we mentioned it the opening evening, we have the evening at the end of the day of practice, we have a difficult dedication of merit. We dedicate whatever benefits we've received from a day of practice, for the welfare of others. And the first evening of the retreat, we did this that dedicated to retreat the welfare of the people who've been impacted by the earthquake. And then the retreat this went into silence. And when you go on retreats, kinds of retreats, you don't read the news is no contact, really that kind of contact with the world outside. So with people in their streets really didn't know what's going on. But the staff at spirit rock and also the teachers for us teachers are four of us teaching. We kept track of the news as we went along. And one of the questions we had was, do we tell the retreats because this is you know, such a major event and each day, you know, more and more serious, became clearer and clearer what was going on. And, and then one evening, one of the teachers did the dedication of merit, little ceremony at the end of the evening. wasn't just Wednesday evening. And he dedicated the merit of that day of practice to the people who had victims of the earthquake and the tsunami. And then he mentioned in that I think, how many people have died in different countries, and what we do at that

time, and that was at 930, which is in the evening, after 930 in the evening is when people go to bed on retreats.

So

it might not have been a very skillful time to tell people because some people some people were deeply shocked to find this out. And there were at least two people who couldn't go to sleep that night. They were so disturbed by this kind of news. And they hadn't didn't have a chance to process it or to do something about it. They just, you know, retold and then said to bed. So it's kind of you know, it's a little bit odd situation. Without everybody was there that close that evening session to me but half the group Was there for the evening session. And they're still probably half the group who didn't, hadn't heard. And so we come to Sunday morning, when the retreats ended yesterday morning. And it just didn't seem right to send people out into the world and see the headlines or turn on the news and find out for the first time the tremendous impact that this earthquake has had. So and also people leave retreats after a week of silence. There's what we often say people are very open, they're very sensitive to to the world and themselves and their feelings and everything. So became particularly important for us teachers to kind of somehow take care of that or and meet people or, or somehow prepare people for what was in store. So but how Do you do that? How do you introduce people to this? You know? So I gave, so it fell on me to do that little presentation. And so I want to say some of the things I said there, and then I want to say a few more things. It didn't seem right to just kind of lay out the facts of what happened, just, you know, just kind of thing. Oh, and by the way, you fellows even sitting here, you know, 150,150,000 people just died last week. And there's probably more and 500,000 people who are injured and 5 million people who are homeless, you know, you put it on through kind of that list. And it didn't seem right. So I started kind of slowly, kind of building to Connecticut. I never I never said the figures but I kind of tried to do it. Gently. And I started off by telling a story from day before. Right Left spirit rock to go an errand that I had to do. And I was driving down the Sir Francis Drake Boulevard and the cars on both sides of the road behind me in front of me all pulled over to the side as I looked in my rearview mirror and there was a fire truck behind me with the sirens and lights on. And so I pulled over to the side and then my eye started tearing up. I started kind of feeling kind of really deep kind of deeply touched. That kind of a kind of a sadness but kind of a sadness a child right or kind of I wouldn't call it sadness but I was deeply touched moved by this and with a simple thing, but it was moved by was it always people there was a need there was something in some supposedly when they were sirens it means that some some they need to get somewhere to offer help. And that all these people move their cars decided to open the path and make it the path clear for the fire truck. So you might think I'm overly sensitive to cry, something like that. Any private material, but I also have stuff to retreat. But I thought it was quite beautiful. It was really touched and moved by the fact that people, you know, I gave people the best credit the best of them and that everyone you know, was very concerned and want to help and it's kind of the best human nature was coming out where when there's problems when there's people are suffering. People help they get out here in this case they get out of the way and make it possible for the emergency vehicles to get through. And, and then I mentioned the earthquake I've always mentioned first was that in the United States, I think as if what I

could gather by Sunday morning, private citizens and donated 100 million dollars to relief efforts in the army. Indian Ocean. And that seemed quite impressive. And I was very moved by that such outpouring of support so quickly, even before the President asked for it. The I know people who did their first response Monday morning, you know, they got a sense of what's going on Sunday and Monday morning, they sent checks to the American Red Cross in different places to offer help. In Britain, as a bit yesterday morning, I think there was something like \$35 million that private citizens had donated. And I was really impressed by this outpouring of goodwill, people's compassionate response to the suffering in the world. So my way of introducing the magnitude of the of what had happened was not to go through the facts and figures of what had happened, of you know, the harm that it did, the tragedy that occurred, but rather than talking about the compassionate response, and magnitude of the response You know, it's been a mere reflection of the magnitude of the problem. But that was the way to introduce the switch weakness to the what was going on why it happened. And I'm very, very I'm very inspired by the response that many people have had all over the world. And, and some people that kind of in our own extended community, or affected there was one person who some of you might know France, who was his was a manager and cook for many retreats, taught at spared rock spirit rock retreats, and he was on the beach in India when the tsunami hit there. So we got an email from him and saying that he saw that he was doing chicken on the beach, and he saw the wave coming. And so he ran he ran up to the top of a wall and up into a tree and held on tight and then prayed as the water rushed over him. And he's and he said, his mind became the Clear. And, and it was a very brief telegraphed kind of kind of email because you mentioned all the depth that was all around him. So what are you just telling people he was okay. And then Steve Smith, who's the passionate teacher, was in Thailand at the time. And I don't know what he was doing there. I don't know if he was any danger himself. I feel like he wasn't. But his response was to go to the place, the coast of Thailand where people had been victims and people had died, and was helping with pulling up bodies finding bodies. That was his response to go down there and do that. And I was really happy to hear that and kind of his sense of pride is the right word, or proud or happy that because I feel that one of the things that mature Buddhist practitioners can offer is, as is the ability to go into situations of great distress, even when there's you know, Finding bodies voted bodies and have the ability through the deep Dharma practice of dealing, confronting impermanence and confronting suffering, learning how to work with it, to be able to go in and be of service to situations where maybe other people who are haven't developed themselves would maybe feel just too much distress or fear or, and wouldn't be able to stay present for those kinds of events. So my own kind of response or on thoughts around this kind of event, is to focus mostly on the response. This is what I talked about in the retreat. But also that's my own personal kind of first line of approach, you know, what's the response going to be? And that this is where, you know, kind of the responsibility We have a responsibility, ability to respond. The place where it's our, you know, where our practices expressed in the world or good our good heart is expressed in the world is in how we respond to the world around us. And then focus on that. And that's really kind of maybe the key thing. Buddhism points to these taking responsibility for our ability to respond, to study that to understand that and in some ways, take refuge in that or find find support in that and act on it acts in the world, rather than being paralyzed rather than being lost and fear or distress or, or many things are so easily possible in this kind of situation. There's a, one of my favorite

story, theistic stories, God stories. That is a story about a person who died and went to heaven. And as the person who went up to God and said,

complaint.

Because, you know, the world's a mess, all these people are suffering and there's wars and earthquakes and all these terrible things, and you should be doing something about it. And so God said, I did do something about it, I made you. So not to put the responsibility somewhere else on some other place outside of us, but in some sense, some sense, find where we take responsibility ourselves for, for, you know, whereas our response, our ability to respond when we take care of things, what do we do, now that we're responsible for the whole world? You know, we can't fix it all. But as individuals in this vast sea of humanity, where's our response? How do we, and that's why I was so inspired by all these individuals who unprompted you know, so many people unprompted, send out their donations to different charities and such a beautiful thing. So in terms of then looking at the response, which is a very key aspect of Buddhist practice, you know, what is a response? And there's two there's there's two aspects of response. One is that aspect it has to do with how we react to what's what's, you know what, what happens in segwayed wells up inside of us, and then what we actually do acting on it. So what wells up inside, it can certainly be horror and distress and fear. Many different strong feelings. And part of Buddhist practice then is to learn to be present for those so we can be present for them in a wise way. So wisdom has a chance to mature and grow in a certain way of being being present and honest that we're having these feelings. If we're not, if we haven't learned the skills of honest presence to those things, then it's all too easy for those things to kind of be in the background kind of offstage, directing our show kind of pushing us around, or keeping us paralyzed, or keeping us in a mode of complaining. Complaining is really Popular. One a nice kind of nice administration said that but one of the aspects that struck me about the earthquake I've heard a lot of people distressed about things in the in the world in the nation over the last months. And usually it goes together with a sense of complaining. But the earthquake you can't exactly complain. I mean, it isn't like someone you know, they had a boat, and someone then rigged the boat or, you know, or some other people made a decision or about the earthquake, just you know, you kind of have to complain about people doing it. So here's a very painful and distressing situation where the complaining doesn't actually make as much sense as it does when you can point blame. And so they get into is very important, this kind of turning, stop blaming also or complaining is a way of detracting sometimes from taking, finding the place where we were able to respond and to act in the world and so it's God's story, that guy was complaining to God. And God said, Why made you don't complain, it was up to you to do something. And so part of practice is to really look at the feelings, the emotions that are arise, and to and to understand they're workable. There's something we can practice with, we can bring certainly compassion to ourselves and make presence to ourselves, we can explore it, we could, you know, not let them have the upper hand, by having a strong sense of presence that we develop in the midst of it. And sometimes it takes a long time, months or years of some like a meditation practice or mindfulness practice, to have the ability to stay present wisely, for some of the most difficult emotions that the person can experience in times of distress. And I imagine I don't know if Steve Smith you know, going

there collecting bodies. You know what his emotional life is like, but I know that he's spent years cultivating and developing himself in a sense being ready To being ready to be able to do something like this. A few weeks ago, I had a conversation with a priest at the tea, one of the senior teachers at the San Francisco Zen Center. She's been there for a very long, long time. And maybe it's getting time for her to leave Zen center. After many years of living there and practicing there and being a teacher there. However, Zen center doesn't have a severance package or doesn't have a, you know, it's like they don't get it, you know, they don't have a retirement plan for monks. You know, so, so, and she always knew that, and that's not she didn't she didn't join Zen center to, you know, have benefits. She joined she became a priest or a monk nun, in order to try to practice as deeply as you could, and then also to take her compassion and concern for the world and live it in the world around her so I was having a conversation with her. I was little bit concerned about her leaving and I was wondering how she could take care of herself and I was gonna see if maybe I could help her do something because I knew I knew that she wasn't gonna I didn't have much money or any money and so she was very frank and honest with me I was really struck by the honesty I asked someone very personal questions like that. And but one thing she said to me really, really struck me was it's true that I don't have much money to leave that center and I don't know what I don't know what's next to store for me. What's going to happen? And, but you know, he's 25 years of training, we're all about this 25 years of training where if I don't have the ability to be homeless, and be happy or be contented or to keep saving, keep my peace, then my training is that hasn't really been worthwhile. Her years of trading was to face situation of great distress or great challenge and be able to do it with wisdom and compassion and peace. So that, you know, that kind of that was a very powerful statement. She's been training herself for that. I think of that, you know, Buddhist training is a training for, among other things, it is a training for the times in our lives, when things are, you know, overwhelmingly challenging, which happens to most people sooner or later. People, you know, people we know die, or you're going to die, I think at some point. And so that challenge, you know, sometimes it's a real challenge to die because, because it's really quick, it's not so challenging, but if it's slow, you know, it's gonna be quite quite a big deal to deal with. And so, typically, we're preparing ourselves for that. Sometimes people come to retreats, and or meditation, and one of the things they ask is, why should I sit with physical pain? or Why should I sit with any pain? I mean, I could just go and you No I could leave and once on retreat you know we did we do I do as a teacher I do interviews, you know so with people they every couple of days to have an interview with a teacher, it's a short interview or 15 minutes and you're usually very nice and so that spirit rock teaching and this guy came in for his interview usually talk about what you what your practice has been like over the last 24 hours. And this guy said, Oh, today I just came back from around a golf with a neighboring golf course. And I thought that was rather unique for the silent retreats, some of you may be, you know, wish you thought about that. And so, you know, so you know, there are options to sitting with, you know, other options besides sitting if you're sitting with your pain You can go to the golf course. And I've known people who were sitting machine zen, then seven days and then two scenes. In the middle of it went to the movies. They came back. So there's many ways of practicing. But so there are ways of kind of, you know, keeping us from staying present with difficulty or sometimes retreat, there's easier ways you can always just change your posture or you can do all kinds of things. So people ask why, why should I stay with the pain of difficulty, and they're certainly

wise reasons for not staying with pain. And there's also wise reasons to stay with it and retreat. Even when pain is optional. It can be seen as a training. When it's safe to be with pain, you're not damaging yourself. Then it's a training to learn about our reactions or responses or emotions or thoughts or beliefs. There's so many things that go on the complicate the situation when we're in pain, that argument and exaggerate Or magnify our suffering. And if we if we take a situation that's relatively safe to where we feel pain, and to stay with it and work with it and really investigated really thoroughly, and to learn all the different ways that we tick around it all the way in which react to it, then when it becomes much more real, when it's not optional, when the pain is, you know, this can't get away, then you're already familiar with yourself really well. And so that you can enter that situation with more calm and peace or wisdom or useful way, rather than getting lost in the reactivity that might happen. So, within in terms of responding to the suffering of the world, I, you know, I think there's two primary directions that response can take one One Direction is external, you know, there's suffering out there, to try to meet that try to help in some way or other And the other way is internal to move in. And both responses are very significant. And I think important to understand the external one, you know, someone, neighbors in distress and neighbors say, whatever, it's pretty normal to go help the neighbor, make some dinner or go shopping or do whatever. And it's situation is larger in the world. I think that people will often offer other things. The Compassionate response, I think, is not just a good idea. I think it I believe, and this is a belief, maybe it's not true for everybody, I don't know how, you know, the psychophysiology of human beings varies from person to person. But I believe that you know, for most people, that the compassionate response is something which is innate in, in in their hearts, and not to allow it to come forth. When it's, when it's been around, they're struck. Is diminishes our Sales limits or sales, you know, is a kind of violence to ourselves. When we allow it to come forth, you know, we're not held there so hold himself back not numbing ourselves or shutting something down. But, and in addition, we're actually allowing something beautiful to flow through us something that's healthy. I think the compassionate response in and of itself is a healthy response. I read recently that when people have a compassionate response, the human body releases oxytocin. And oxytocin is released in different situations, but one place was released in is when mothers are nursing. And one of the one of the effects oxytocin has apparently on the system, it it kind of it makes it soothes us and calms us and makes some sense because if you're gonna respond compassionately to someone, you're there to calm and soothe them. So you want to be that way, right? So that you know if you're full of fear and distress and anxiety, it's very hard to kind of meet even you know, even if you want to help someone just kind of like a little bit mixed messages then or, you know, your presence is not maybe so helpful. So you know, things happen physiologically in our body that are very powerful and healthy, with a compassionate response. It seems to be the ability to act compassionately has a lot to do with how well we know ourselves, and how well we're able to work and work with our distresses and our fears or fears and anxieties that do arise. So one response is the external response to act in the world. And if the situation if the if the tragedy in the world is really big, or the tragedy in our life with our neighbors really big or something. I think that and we don't respond. I think the bigger the tragedy is, the more violence we do to ourselves if there isn't some kind of response, but it doesn't have to be an external response, there's a second response. And that's the internal response, the way we respond going in. And what I mean by this is, is, is this movement to take the situation and to use it to motivate

us to purify our own hearts, or to practice for ourselves, to get down to the roots of our own suffering our own greed, hate and delusion, our own clinging and clarify and purified and work with it? When there were some members of our community who left right after 911 to go see the three month retreat at IMS, before they went that when you found them and said, You know, I don't know what you're thinking you know about leaving going now, but I'd imagine that some people would think that this is much too self centered or selfish. or inappropriate to go off on retreat right after 911. When we don't know what's going to happen, there's so much distress and such big anxiety and such big problems. And I said, I want to reassure you that I think that is one of the most powerful responses to something like 911 is to go and see a three month retreat. We need some people in the world who go and are trying to purify the hearts of the depths of the hearts, which I think what happens on these long retreats, we need to have some people show that it's possible to do that kind of deep, deep work. And if it isn't possible to purify the heart and deep ways, then we're all lost. You know, so someone has to do it. And so I think that's, I see that as a very powerful response. So they weren't going to New York, they weren't helping in that kind of external ways. But they were they were going to their way of helping the world was to go internally, and work on themselves in a sense, and hopefully, the contact with suffering. was a very healthy source of motivation to really apply themselves really try hard for the sake of others for the benefit of others, but the movement was inwards rather than outwards. And there are many situations where there's suffering in the world. And it doesn't make sense for us to respond directly. You know, there's something, most of the suffering we're not going to in the world, we're not going to address that so much. So, but we can be motivated by that. We read the newspaper and we find out what's going on in Uganda or anywhere else we can be you can be motivated by that it doesn't have to paralyze us or it or discouraged us that we can't respond. We can't be motivated by that. And that motivation is, for example, can be turned inwards. To practice in our practice, so I'm gonna practice harder and more diligently or it could have motivation can be flowed. I can't go to you again. I can't go to Sri Lanka, but that I will. I'm really motivated. I'm going to help in local soup kitchen, I'm going to take on motivation help locally, some situation. So there's many ways of responding externally and internally. The Buddhist tradition, as a practice tradition, has the most to say about the movement in inward. I think I believe that this tradition says that both are equally important, the external response and the internal response. But what Buddhism has developed over the centuries, is a lot of skills and understanding of it, how to go in and do this inner work really well. And that's kind of the strength of it, and then, and then you come from there and go and go into the world. Hopefully, in the Zen tradition, they talk about returning to the world with gifts, bestowing hands after doing this work. So then there's a wonderful mutuality that goes on that. That you know, the practice within, in a sense, is a support for able to practice without in our contact with the world without in our receptivity to the world without his support for being able to go within, and they kind of go round and round. They've got together. So, in the midst of all this tragedy, I think it's been really important that we're watching and witnessing one of the largest relief efforts in the world ever. And I don't think that it's just kind of abstract institutions, they're doing that relief work. It's really an expression of collective will and good heart of countless millions of people in the world. And so I think it's important, I think, also be inspired and encouraged by that collective goodwill. And I think it's also important to find that inspiration within your own heart, in the in the ability of your own heart to respond, instead of complaining, or whatever,

or nothing. So those are my thoughts. My attempt to try to say something appropriate. anything anybody would like to say we could test the mic. Hi, I was inspired to read a webpage by joanna Macy, if you just Google her, and she's got an open letter about the situation and one simple place to click and send things off for relief in Sri Lanka, I was looking for a site that was a little removed from the institutions that we know about, because some writing that I was looking at was from someone who said that most of the people don't trust government relief and that they're interested in individual donations that go directly to the people without a lot of overhead. And, and that is the site that Joanna was talking about. And I don't know if you all know who she is, but she's a Longtime Buddhist practitioner and has done a lot of work in Sri Lanka. So I said, we've put a lot of a lot of trust in what she has to say about the situation there. And I trust the site that she sent people to Joanna Macy. Turn it on.

Hello. There we go. I just wanted to say I found it really helpful. To listen to your talk today. I found out about it. I was sitting down at my mother's house and my mother tends to catastrophize things and get very, very dramatic and she'd watched all the news footage and I woke up first thing in the morning and she was all of a sudden, retelling all these horrible stories of tragedy that were very Personal and I just completely shut down. When I decided I didn't want to read the papers. I didn't want to look at TV. I didn't want to be so overwhelmed with that feeling of bleakness and hopelessness. But by doing that it isn't numbing out and is a denial of reality and what's going on around you and that has a cost to so I'm just very grateful that you've helped frame it in a way that I feel. I can sit with a situation and not be overwhelmed by by bleakness, you seem to frame it in a way in which there's hope and you're seeing it in a positive light. So great. I thank you for that. Thank you.

Well, then may whatever benefit and merit that has come from our practice here this evening may be dedicated for the welfare and well being of all the people, all the beings who have been affected, harmed by the earthquake. And may our practice be somehow some way or other seen and unseen ways spillover, directly and indirectly, to help alleviate the suffering of those people. So thank you all very much.