

2005-06-06 Three Characteristics: Dukkha

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SPEAKERS

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So, the hope the naive hope of this talk is it's going to make you all happy. Really happy. But partly the reason maybe it's naive, hopeless hope is I'm going to talk about suffering. But the purpose of talking about suffering is so we can be happy. So it would be nice to be here a little bit happier than when you came. So that I'm not, you know, wasting my efforts here. So I

don't know

I can do it but so Three weeks ago, I gave a talk here on impermanence. And they talked about impermanence, which is, from the point of view of what's called the three characteristics. And these are very central teachings of Buddhism. And more important than teachings. They are central insights that give insight meditation, its name. So we said, you know, we call ourselves insight meditation center. And people are often asking, well, what's the insights of the insects yet? What were the insights about them? So people say, Aha, I got an insight. The reason why I always say x is because my parents said, Why to me when I was a kid, and know that you know, file, biographical insights, psychological insights, to work with psychological, psychological, psychotherapeutic culture. So people often think that's what insight is. The insight of insight meditation has to do with seeing clearly. So it's not understanding per se, it's not intellectual understanding, but rather, it's sufficient. pacity of using our perceptions to perceive directly how things are, as opposed to how we think they are. And one of the sort of three primary characteristics of our moment to moment experience that we can see if we can see clearly is that in some way or other, it's impermanent, in some way or other. It is. suffering. Might not be a good word here, the word and Polly's Dukkha with the first turn our call suffering, and in some way or other our experience is not so. So how does it work? it's counterintuitive to some degree. The Buddha called the way most people think topsy turvy And it's topsy turvy because people take what is impermanent, to be permanent. They take what is suffering as being a form of happiness. And they take what is not sell, and sell. So they have it all mixed up, we have it all mixed up. And so part of what the insight meditation practice is trying to do is to take their understanding and put it right side up

again. So you can see more clearly how things actually are. For some people that's topsy turvy. I don't know this is occurs to me, you know, I've been told I've read even many times that I'm seeing you all upside down. I don't know about it, you know, somehow, but somehow I think you're up see right side up, right. My my brain has to understand that way but the way that the light kind of crosses inside the eyes and you know goes against the back of the retina, you're all upside down Thank you. topsy turvy.

So

So part of the function that of mindfulness is to help write the perception so we can see what how things are, but not for the purposes of only seeing how things are. But more importantly, for the purpose of beginning to loosen up, the way the mind the heart is constricted or contracted or tight, or holding on clenched or resisting versus defensive. The mind sometimes we call it the heart will often find itself in a mood or an attitude. It's very deeply seated. of somehow They're being attached or pushing away. And in fact, most people's mind most of the time, are characterized subtly or grossly by those movements of pushing or holding. What does it take to get the mind to stop pushing or holding, so the mind can be free, open, relaxed at peace. It turns out that it might be relatively easy for some people to go on vacation or have a day off from work and feel a certain level of calm and relaxation and peace. But if you did, if you weren't on vacation for 365 days, pretty soon, your decompression you relaxation from your busy life would settle out and you will discover that the peace that you experienced the first day of your vacation was not As peaceful as the mind can get. In fact, you might see that actually you don't have access to further peace at some point you realize, you know, oh, there's a degree of anxiety there's a degree of fear there's a degree degree of givenness in the mind that I did you know, that even there, when I'm actually been on vacation for 300 days, just kind of relax and have to do a lot. So there, it's it can be very deep, the way the mind is conditioned, conditioned itself, to be attached to be cling to be tight, contracted. So you need very powerful medicine, to get down into what's called the roots of the mind to help the mind loosen up like enough, get free. So the three insight into three characteristics is offered as medicine for that purpose. is if you can see into the nature of reality seems the nature of our experience very clearly That's one of the one very powerful way to begin loosening the grip of the mind. And the reason why we need strong medicine is very hard on our own, through our own volition and choice to just let go and relax just like that deep, deepest level possible. And so we need something besides our own efforts. And one of the things that Buddhism offers suggests is it's your it's seeing things as they actually are, which will help seeing it somewhat maybe have a parallel kind of statement to I guess is Jesus who said, The truth will set you free. So when you can see clearly what what it what is that somehow sets us free.

So

So topsy turvy one of the ways one of the starting points to explore suffering, this understanding of suffering is to begin understanding it. See, see how it works in your life that is true. How is it in your life that you've mistaken? What is suffering or happiness seen as being happy? Or another way that the

Buddhist tradition translates the word Dukkha sees what is unsatisfactory as satisfactory? ceases unreliable? What is reliable? How have you done that and probably all of you done it to some degree. I see it's very clear in children my my my seven year old he can have the absolutely convinced about what's going to make him happy. And I right now it's baseball cards. And he had this idea a few weeks ago They're taking here something like 360 baseball cards. He knows the exact number. And he had some idea that he was gonna reorganize all the cards some new way, in his little folder book that he has. So he thought he'd be a lot happier. So we took all the cards out there really fast take 360 cards out, but for seven year old to organize them again and put them back in. If this still hasn't happened, in fact, my desk at home is covered with baseball cards. And I tell him, you know, you got to do something because I need my desk back. I don't know if that was a good example. But But do you see these kids where they you know, they have some, you know, they see the clearly they had some idea this was gonna make me happy. Remember when I was a kid, maybe about his age. Little bit older slightly older. I really wanted I remember seeing a lot of things now but I remember wanting this toy machine gun plastic toy kind of life sized machine gun kind of things you know, my kid doesn't even know exists. And that's you know, really wanted this machine gun.

So I guess I wanted it so badly

that my parents bought it to me and I got it for Christmas.

I don't think I ever played with it

you know that the lower the promise that toy machine gun was empty. It didn't really live up it was it. I thought it was gonna make me happy. But getting it didn't really do much at all. When I've seen it sometimes that certain activities I can become mesmerized by the promise of happiness, maybe even by some degree of happiness and joy in doing the activity. But if I step back, I realized that actually the activity and involved in is really uncomfortable, really miserable. When one example comes to mind is that maybe that's not a good example, again, is if I really want something, engage in some activity, trying to get something accomplished, if something gets me done, and I'm driven to get it done, and I'm not paying attention. Then I'm driven going along, and then something prompts me to pay attention to what's going on. And I realized, wait a minute, I am really uncomfortable. My body is tense, my shoulders are tense, my stomach is tight. My mind is kind of getting kind of contracted and getting a headache because I'm so involved trying Doo doo doo. And so the promise of getting something that I want, and being engaged trying to get it sometimes can mask the discomfort of the engagement. That makes sense when I say. So that's another way in which the thinking understanding is upside down. If we step back and pay attention to what's going on while we're doing it, sometimes we won't, we'll do the cost benefit analysis. And we'll say this is not worth it. Where I'm trying to accomplish here is simply not worth it. And I think the there's a lot of people I've talked to in tech world and Silicon Valley, who at some point have decided this is not worth it anymore. You know, they can do the cost benefit analysis and somehow, you know, maybe depends a little bit how much money's in their bank, but

they do the analysis. He said, this is not worth it anymore, and they're ready to do something else. And so topsy turvy. So we sort of that one way of understanding topsy turvy is we take what is unhappy, we're suffering for being for being happy. The word is Dukkha. And the Dukkha is a multi billion word has a lot of meanings in the original language. So it's usually translated into English as suffering in the Four Noble Truths. Also in other key teachings of Buddhism, it's fair to call it maybe translate your suffering. But as one of the three characteristics, the characteristic of Dukkha Some people prefer to translate it as unsatisfactory or unreliable, that things are ultimately unsatisfactory or unreliable, to provide lasting happiness or provide lasting identity. This is who I am and so, is this movement of the mind to create ultimately, this is going to do it once and for all if I can get, I can just get this relationship. If I can get it if I just go on this retreat, it'll do it. If I can go you know, you know, you know this is going to do it for me this is going to do it for me. And more importantly insights is actually nothing will do it for you. There is no thing out there which is reliable, can provide ultimate reliability, ultimate satisfaction. So when we started realizing out there, the thing we'll do it then what should the committee produce a book in here? or certainly out there? There's nothing then let's look in here. And my heart supposed to be great write beautiful heart or the wonderful psyche or the brain or I'll find something Buddha nature of this Buddhist talk about Buddha nature, I'll just sit quietly and find the Buddha nature that's reliable, isn't it? And when you do insight, meditation and develop a very keen ability to see what's happening in the present moment, you also find, even though there's a lot of beauty in here, that nothing inside also, no thing inside also can provide lasting happiness can provide reliable place to rest can provide a ultimate satisfaction. No thing in here. So what's left? And what's left is for the mind, the awareness to becoming slowly dissuaded from searching from grasping, grasping for things outside or grasping for things inside. As the mind stops grasping what's a nice image you see for yourself stressing right, the outside and inside. There's like a butterfly and flies away. And so what becomes reliable is not a thing. It's not something you can point to there it is. But rather what's what's reliable is the is that awareness of the mind, which is not holding on not clinging to anything. It's very hard to make that into a thing. And it can be very hard for many most people to believe that something which is not a thing has any value because it's things that have value. The house the job the relationship, the bank account, the you know, whatever my safety or my good looks like good smarts, my good kindness, my my wonderfulness as if it was something inside to because there's none of that is worth holding on to because there's something of greater value. And what's a greater value is in a certain kind of way invisible has no monetary value, you can't see it. But it's experienced as a kind of ease or a kind of peacefulness or a kind of lightness or clarity or sense of openness or spaciousness or certain kind of joy or happiness, the happiness of a mind, which doesn't

claim the whole

happiness of a mind that doesn't need anything. Happiness of a heart, that or mind or heart which is at rest in itself, without that place without it being a place. The mind is not a place you can't rested it. So the mind is resting in itself. You know, it's right, where's it resting? You know, it's

so.

So the one of the ways that insight meditation then functions is as we begin looking carefully at our experience, we start seeing, oh, this here what I'm having when I took as being reliable, what I took as being satisfactory, what I took as being full of happiness, doesn't really qualify either. Either as that or immediately, or in the long term doesn't provide lasting long term happiness. As so to see that in the experience, let's be convinced nothing here. This is the kind of teaching or no, no thing is reliable, nothing is going to provide lasting satisfaction. I don't think hearing is going to do you much good. We'd actually begin to see this isn't isn't too if this doesn't do it, this doesn't do it. So for example, to see very clearly, that clinging to self image is not going to be very helpful. doesn't provide real happiness. We think it's gonna provide happiness. Oh, if people could only see me. You know, I put on a blue shirt today to come down here. You know, if you can imagine looking in the mirror and wondering, you know, blue shirt, you know, but I bet they think blue is nice. It goes well with my eyes. I've been told You know, they probably, you know, think much better of me to hide the fact that I before and, and so we can get caught up in the world of self image and somehow subconsciously, my happiness is tied to how I think you see me how I impressed you will make me happy. But if you really can see clearly what the mind is doing really deeply see it actually is not going to provide lasting happiness. And there's an alternative that's much better. There's an alternative happiness and well being that comes when the mind can learn. Not to be neurotically concerned about self image, or be seeing the scene a certain way. So the mind which is not caught up in the world, isn't mine which is free so in the world, not of the world. So the ignorance is a really important part of Buddhist practice, you know, Buddhist teaching is that the teaching people are ignorant. The primary thing that people are ignorant about is ignorant about the three characteristics. And if they penetrate or overcome this, this ignorance, that is one of the things that liberates us, is that important, this particular teaching for Buddhism. So, as we sit and meditate, a lot of things that people associate meditation with, like becoming calm or reducing stress, getting concentrated. Those are considered to be tools, sharpening tools that sharpen our ability to see more more clearly. It's like you have a microscope, and it's all dusty. So you have to clean to dust off the lens, and only then can you see clearly, only when the mind becomes calm and still enough in the dust of the mind is subtle. Can we see clearly into what this is called the three characteristics. And then you might realize something. There was a

monk

in Thailand, I think he might have been an American or an Englishman who first was a Zen monk in Japan for many years. And then he went to Thailand became a monk there. And he lived in a cave for many many years. Practicing away as bunk sometimes do in Thailand. And eventually he died. Maybe diagnosis gave us he gave us his home. He died there. The old man and After he died, they went up to his cave to see what was there. And they found written on the wall of the painting on the wall and it was cave was monastic graffiti. And there was a, there was a kind of a drawing cartoon drawing of a Buddhist monk, kind of jumping up in the air kind of kicking his heels, kind of spirit arms up kind of like

really happy. And then above was the caption. Oh, oh, what? boundless joy? To know No, there's no true happiness. So why don't you think about that? Just that expression, right to grapple with it, take it as a co on for the next week. Talk to your friends about it. Try to explore all the different ways in which that might be true and how it works. How can that be? Oh, boundless joy, that there is no true happiness. So then if you have you Well, we have some time if you have any questions or comments you'd like to make testimonials about suffering. Yes. Oh, yeah, please. Right behind you there.

So this is very pertinent. This talk for Mike and I we met with a real estate agent today to talk about the specifications of the house we want to buy that will make us happy I'm struggling with how to approach this crazy process. And with not without getting really, you know, oh, I fall in love with this house and oh, this has got to be the one and all this stuff. And I was thinking of a story you told when we were in Palo Alto you're hunting for a car. You said that you every time you'd get all that's the car want know what's the right color and oh, people like me and all this, then you'd stop looking for the car until you weren't grasping for it.

And that's a little hard to do with real estate.

And I'm trying to figure out how to how to approach this with something that has to happen so fast and you know, we've got to be making these decisions and if we don't think about what's gonna make us happy, we'll end up in something that will be wrong, you know, for us and how do we how do we hold this

was a great topic. I think that you should spend a couple of years thinking about when they

Spend \$400,000 more yes sir

you know really consider what what's all about but the yeah thanks it's it's very very valid to think about what brings you a sense of well being what brings you makes you happy you know underlying all this whole place what is really important for you What's most important for you? And I mean there can be things that can be things about a house that can make you happy, can have a beautiful view for example, or it could have a beautiful You know, something or other right. And or, or you know, a really big house that you feel really spacious and relaxed all the time or one that had big veranda with opening doors and you could do cool breeze coming in would make you certainly you sit there and you know, and sit there and have your your Calistoga in the evening. The you know, that certainly has a lot of there's a lot of things that can bring you pleasure and pleasure can bring a certain kind of sense of well being the world are the questions though is, is that really enough value for you that you want to spend the time and the money for that, or there are other things that you've taught your time is better spent that. So for example, immediately comes by my father, when I was growing up various times, we hit here on the house, my parents, but after my parents separated, my father moved into a small apartment built apartment. And he's been living there now for 330 years. And he's very happy not to

have to worry about the yard and repairs and you know, all the things that kept them busy, because he has a lot of other things he'd rather do with his time. He has certain passions for a lot of other things. So he's decided to reduce his attention to house and home so you can follow the other things he's interested in. And so what's the trade off you know, what's most important? For you, maybe it's more important question is what makes you happy. And if you're trying to ask what makes me happy in the house, there might be some things that make you happy. Maybe it's not worth it. Because there's because it precludes the possibility of doing other things that make you a lot more happy. Right? So for example, if you buy a house for \$400,000 you know that maybe a nice house makes you happy. But if you can buy a house for \$300,000, and spend \$100,000, leftover and use it for charity or use it for some good cause, you know, in 2030 years, you might reap so much more benefits from having donated that money to some wonderful charity, wonderful event, made something happen in the world, then to the fact that you're sitting in a nice house. And so you know, what provides happiness what's what's what's important to do? What's it? What's the important thing for who you are? And, and so is that helping?

With real estate around here? It's like, you know, you'd have to buy a trailer for 400,000 the problem I saw

advertised in the telephone in Redwood City. \$64,000. a trailer, yeah, two bedroom. You want a trailer? Imagine what you can do. Imagine what you could do with left the rest of the money. And you have a community you know, a lot of people live in these communities that the house is I look at the house. What they were important is the neighborhood. You know, and so you know, a trailer park trailer, parks and things have really great neighborhood, you know, those community get to know it's simple. So some people love it. Who knows?

Give us food gives me food for thought.

That's all I was hoping to do. I can't answer your questions, but I could stir things up. That Okay. Yes, please. Um,

after reading Singh

will not be reborn again.

And all the activity that we get involved in to end suffering. what I'm wondering is And believe me, I'm not contemplating this, but if you just committed suicide, you would be you'd be done. You won't have to deal with anything. It'd be all over. But yeah, and it that the reason why that the Buddhist philosophy must require the rebirth because otherwise he could commit suicide in there you'd be

more or less reached the goal of nothingness.

But

if there must be a rebirth in order to achieve it, then the suicide wouldn't work. I mean, is that the whole idea that why there has to be a rebirth, because otherwise everything else kind of falls apart.

I could see the logic what you're saying. I think in ancient India, when the teachings of rebirth arose, the horse was in front of the cart, I think they believed in rebirth first, and then they can put the idea that'd be nice to be free from them in endless cycles. They didn't. As you know, you know what your logic kind of puts the horse in front of the cart. But if you don't believe in rebirth, then the important question then would be if you don't believe in it, then why stay around? You know, if you're having a hard time, things are difficult. And that becomes very acute that question for some people when there's people that are really sick, and the question of euthanasia comes up for assisted suicide or something, at what point does that become a valid option? Or no? And, you know, where's the line that we draw when we decide? I believe that there are other motivations to avoid suicide besides the idea of rebirth. What one of them is, with those other maybe other people. Better arguments or better understandings of mind. But my understanding is this, that if, if we have cultivated enough sensitivity, we will realize two things. One will realize the tremendous impact our suicide could have on others. And I've seen over and over again people committed suicide, and how amazingly devastating it was for people around if they had any inkling of what was going to happen in their wake. They wouldn't have done it, I'm pretty convinced, but they didn't know they were kind of lost in their own world. So that was the other sensitivity has to do with sensitivity, sensitivity externally, but there's sensitivities internally to our own working. I think you'll always see that that the movement to commit suicide requires very high degree of suffering or to do it doing it itself is a form of suffering. And then doing it in such a suffering that is actually worse than maybe the suffering you're living with. So I don't know if that's true, because I haven't been that severe case of some people have been. But so one of the arguments I'm making here is that sensitivity will show that there's that it's not the best route to go. That's satisfying enough to something you're contemplating. Yes.

I'm not contemplating suicide either. But

it seemed like it took forever to memorize that meta sutra and Have a friend of a friend who just found out that she's got lymphoma, and maybe 50% chance of living and she started chemo and it's It was so shocking to me because here's someone my age who was fine and had night sweats and then all sudden is, you know, really sick. And I like to think that saying the meta sutra will be helpful to someone in that situation but but it's

so Metta Sutta is a Buddhist discourse on loving kindness. And in the Buddhist tradition is often emphasis on having rousing and very powerful intention for loving kindness for other people. And there's this discourse called discourse in loving kindness which is sometimes used as a form of

protection in different schools of Buddhism, different kind of chants, or different liturgy or used to help people get better, be safer to kind of have some kind of intention, some kind of effect on the world around us. So the question is, how do these things work? The book, my understanding is that the Buddhist traditions, at least the early Buddhist tradition, says that yes, these things can have an effect. But the vehicle for that effect is not the words or even the meaning of the words so much as the intention behind them or the intention behind our speaking them. So we when we chant a Metta Sutta, we infuse it with our intention, and it's been infused with other people's intention. And then intention, somehow has it as a as a channel to drop rates in the universe in the world. And maybe it's just kind of, you know, failures. It kind of goes through all the people that we meet. The fact that you know, if your friend hears and learns that you're chanting the Metta Sutta, for it isn't the worst I can detect that someone cares that counts. And that makes a big difference. So since intentionality, the motivation that carries the power, and it can be tremendous power in motivation or intention. And so in that sense, I believe it has a big effect.

When my husband, my first husband was told he had three weeks to live. And he was going to a conference to as a keynote speaker.

The next day,

he decided that he wouldn't take chemo, he wouldn't do anything. He would just prepare for his death.

And it was my son, who said

you're a fighter. You You've always been a fighter.

And getting that to, you know what you were saying?

My husband decided to fight for his life.

More out of love for his son.

But it became

in the year that he lived beyond that three week death sentence

kind of

coming to terms with himself and love of himself.

So, I see that medicine

work in wondrous ways.

Yeah. For someone who has a spiritual practice the time of dying or A time of crisis is going to be seen as a great opportunity. And if someone has some intuitive sense of the degree of freedom, or

peace,

that's possible. Some people will decide to hang in there in order to find that resolution or find that that work through what needs to be worked through. And if you shortchange that process, and sometimes you shortchange the possibility of resolution or freedom that's, that can happen. But what happens when the chemotherapy is so bad? The results of it are so terrible, that you don't have the ability to actually engage in the practice anymore. And that's where it becomes an article of faith. Some Buddhists will say, you never know what's possible. You never know what's going to happen to that you stay dry, stay conscious as long as you can, because there's always an opportunity for freedom. So I think some people, some Buddhist practitioners are very inspired by what's possible. And so no matter how great the challenge they have in their life, their inspiration for what's possible, carries them or keeps them alive to do the work that can be done. So it sounds like you're your husband did some network. You want to say something or you change my

last one.

Um, one of the things I was thinking about going back to the nothingness,

comment, going back to

going back to the comment about nothingness, and where that comes from. I spent a long time in my study of Buddhism, trying to understand it in an intellectual sense, and I think that if you just rely on that. You can find yourself wandering down this kind of a dark alley of nihilism quite easily. And then the logic, you just can't figure it out. It's not something you can think about and understand. So when I decided just to practice more and think less, that's what really, really helped, you know, because then you understand that Buddhism, if you if you read it the wrong way, it starts to sound very dark, and you can really put a lot into it. That's not there. That makes it sound very, you know what I'm talking about. So yeah, good.

Anyway,

we're certainly Buddhism has been misunderstood in the West quite a bit. And that's one of the ways it's been misunderstood that there's a nihilistic religion, life denying, it's all about kind of attaining some kind of nothingness. And that's not the case at all.

So

The purpose of appreciating suffering is so we can lighten up and be happier. So made it to go together. Thank you