

2006-11-20 Old Age, Sickness, Death, and Peace

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SPEAKERS

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I've been asked by a few people to talk about the same thing I talked about yesterday morning. So those of you who might have been here yesterday morning, heard this, I apologize. It's not a sigh. Hopefully it's not a sign of senility. repeating myself. The talk I gave yesterday morning was given before we did a special ceremony for Hilda Weisberg who we honored as an elder in our community, kind of a wise woman kind of rite of passage. For her, and it was marvelous to do it for her because she is a wise person, elder and someone who inspires us quite a bit in our community. But part of the context of the doing this for her is that she has ALS and declining very quickly. And she came came for the event and she came in a wheelchair with a headrest and went arms already paralyzed. And so, you know, so there was very powerful situation to be giving a talk in preparing for her she was there and I don't know how often to be able to come back here again to your talks. And it made me very aware that the teachings of the Buddha Buddhism were originally discovered and taught to help individuals face the deepest and most fundamental existential issues that everyone has to face. And things like sickness, old age and death. And, you know, sometimes Buddhism is presented in very many different other kinds of contexts. It's not so uncommon in this country to have this practice of mindfulness presented as stress reduction. And that's kind of where I was presented or as a technique to help you kind of manage more successfully at work or to kind of be integrated, better integrated in life and get along better with your spouse or something. And, and although mindfulness practice can help with all those things, but if I can easily lose sight of the fact that as a religious tradition But isn't really trying to offer address a kind of a solution to the dilemmas the suffering the challenges that things like, death provides us. And I think some of you probably most of you, maybe all of you have had your encounter with death, maybe not your own direct one. But you've known people who've died, your parents or relatives or friends or neighbors or various people. And if you really get really close to those situations, the changes the context changes your perspective on what's important. And many things that seemed quite important before the encounter with that now might seem petty, or seem less

important or not important at all, and sometimes even wonder if we know what was I thinking being so caught up in obsessing about these things, when, you know, when we're in contact with the immense fragility or the threat immensity of our life. And you see a little bit this context for Buddhist teachings in a catalyst for the Buddhist set off for his spiritual quest. He's not the Buddha, yes, he was siddhartha. And it said that he learned later a protected life and didn't see much of really what life is about. And as a when he was in his 20s, he, for the first time encountered his sickness, old age and death, in such a way that it really had an impact on him. And, and, you know, that's not so uncommon for sometimes people in 20s 30s 40 somethings later, occasionally, where they really, really, these things haven't really impact. Oh, this means Me too. And so it says in Buddhism, Buddha's encounter with the sickness, old age and death his encounter with three of the four divine messengers. So it's kind of exalted in Buddhist tradition that he would encounter this kind of divine messengers that come to visit. And it gets his attention and probably somewhat distressed or concerned or anxious about this encounter. But then he is visited by the fourth messenger, and he's asking about, he sees a monk, a monastic walking down the street. And there's something about the serenity and peace of that monk, that also grabs his attention, kind of the contrast of the distress yourself seeing sickness, old age and death, is contrasted with him seeing the serenity and peacefulness of a monk. And that contrast kind of is the contrast of Buddhism. On one hand, you have the fundamental the kind of distress anxiety issues that people have around the fundamental existential issues, and then we have the possibility discovering some degree of peace or freedom in relationship to it. So Buddhism is not alone, in addressing these kinds of issues all are the all major religions, all religions, some way or trying to address what it means to be human being. Especially in the face of these big issues. people when they encounter sickness, a job and death, they often go to religion for some explanation, some understanding, what's this life about? What's the meaning? Where's it going? How do I make sense of it? And so, you know, as a religion, Buddhism does that as well. And I think it might be a little bit interesting to, to contrast Buddhism, with Christianity, in that Christianity also is addressing these same issues in its way. But when it describes the life of the founder of Christianity, the family can be arguably the pivotal moment that's really important in in the life of Jesus has to do with his crucifixion, his agony, his death and his resurrection. What happens Iran Death. And there's a lot of difference in Christian traditions interpret that event in a variety of different ways. But it's a way of kind of trying to make sense of the suffering and some of the interpretations are quite beautiful in the kind of clear acceptance or recognition of all of our suffering, and somehow kind of find some way to resolve it or work with it or, or find a peace with it. But you have this image of this man and across crucify me as agony as pivotal moment. In Buddhism. The pivotal moment in the founders life is the Buddha sitting underneath the tree, not nailed to a tree but sitting underneath the tree, sitting quite peacefully, and sitting there with a fair amount of joy and well being. And in this sitting up all night, and in this state of peace, well being, having an experience or having an insight having a experience of release, where he experienced release From the forces of suffering, the forces of distress, the forces of fear the forces of hate the forces of ambition and greed in his own heart was freedom those and being freed of those found a solution or liberation from the suffering of sickness, old age and death. And in the Buddhist tradition, they say that when the Buddha became awakened, death no longer had a foot a foot hole, in his mind, actually death, Mara, the force of death, could no longer find the Buddha. They could say,

find the Buddha in terms of you know, his body, but he couldn't find his mind. Mara was like a mind reader. And the mind of the Buddha couldn't be found anymore. It's no footing there. So this is a very important expression in Buddhism, the idea of having a footing or not having a footing in modern English. We have buttons. We have words like buttons, or hooks, you know, that really got an eye, you know, was really hooked for me. That's really impressive. My button Sir, there was a resistance in the abundance issue or that really cost me that experience. And there's some way in which experiences of life catch us, we get caught later we catch it and we grab on or we resist it or do something. And for some people the experience of death or dying in one way or other is something that catches us catches our attention in a big way. And something happened with the Buddha's enlightenment, where death no longer caught him. So, you know, these buildings encountered death and we can walk through and India he lived for a long time still. And, but, you know, somehow his mind was not caught by there's no buttons around death anymore. And it's been said, I've read many years ago, I read a study that said that they're studying different groups of people, people in different religious backgrounds and different things. And we're looking at people's relationship to death and the conclusion This study was that the two categories to get people to people who were most comfortable with that least afraid of it, were people who meditated. didn't specify what kind of meditation but just said people meditated, and people who taken a lot of acid. So I don't know, you know what that says about meditation? Exactly, but but the there's something about meditation that can help people cope with death or not be so afraid of death and approach it is much more, I mean, the ease than normally would. And I think this is a beautiful thing. And for some people, they've been very motivated, motivated by this idea of how can they address and look at their death, their own death and death of others. So perhaps there's some freedom and some peace in relationship to it. So then, you know, the pivotal moment in the Buddha's life was his release, that he experienced a night of enlightenment. His heart was released, his mind was released. You let you live in other times, some 3545 years. And then at the age of 8081, he died. And the story of how he died is also something that's preserved and remembered by Buddhists. And he died a peaceful death. He seems like he had a sense that death was coming. And it seems as though he goes he he was walking back towards his home country, in the foothills of the Himalayas. And he was walking across the plains of guess it in northern India, heading in that direction, but it seems that in his being frail and a lot of pain and do some pretty sick at this point. He didn't make it all the way back. And we ended up with a place that's an issue. As described as kind of in the backwaters kind of in the kind of when I was going to some places not really anything, it's kind of another special place in any kind of way to some country place. And he laid himself down between two psalteries, beautiful majestic trees they have in India, and he laid himself down between the between the two of them. And it was considered a dignified pose on his right side with one hand underneath his right hand. And he gave his last teaching. And the last thing he said was something like everything is impermanent. He thought that was a really important thing to teach and say everything's impermanent. And given that, then, practice diligently. Practice diligently as they say and then life and death is a great matter. Practice as if Your hair's on fire. No, no, it's easy to practice as this, you know, that's later I can do it later, you know, later. Some of you might be in the later school. You know, I get through it, but you can't hit today's nice, thank you. But, you know, I really get around to my real practice later. You know, I've known people who later was, they were kind of

shocked to realize that later was 35 years later. And they go, Wow, that I put it off that long. And so he's made his last last statement. And then he entered into meditation practice. And the experience of his death in meditation is kind of like in some ways seen in Buddhism is kind of the combination or the, the conclusion of the experience he had when he was enlightened. When he was 36 or so. And the release that he experienced with his enlightenment is brought to perfection or Completion with his death. And what he did is he went to, he was a master meditator and he went through what's called the eight absorptions. He knows, he went through them progressively from one to eight. And then he got eighth and he went backwards again, and, and back down to one. And these are very, very peaceful states of meditation, very rarefied, some of them, some of them have a lot of sense of well being and joy as part of it. A lot of peace, a lot of equanimity in it. And then he went back to one and then he started going up again. And it seems that people who are had gone through these experiences know them well get kind of tuned in and kind of feel that other people are going through them. So is it says attendance and which kind of consents? Oh, yeah, he's not dead. Yes, he's going through these these states. If they Meditation. And then he came to the fourth absorption, which is a particular meditation state where there's a lot of peace, and a lot of equanimity. Mine is very bright. And there's a kind of luminous, very peaceful, there's no pleasure and no pain and that experience, it feels very satisfying. And in that experience, he was a final release. That was kind of like the culmination of the release that experience a long time ago. So to give you some sense of what this might be about, as the mind gets more peaceful in meditation, as it gets more concentrated, one of the things that begins happening is that we begin to let go, and we can start letting go of some of the obsessions that grab us. And some of these things are relatively easy to let go of, and some of the things are quite hard to let go of but You know, just like in the contact counter with death, some repetitive concerns might be easily easy to let go of because we'd have a different context. And they don't always seem important. So in the context of meditation, sometimes it's easy to see, oh, this is not really where I want to be obsessing what I should be doing with my mind. And then kind of letting go of that obsession that concern that preoccupation. And letting go of preoccupation brings with it a feeling of release or peace or calm, it's kind of calming effect on the system. And so part of the process of meditation is to be evaluating where we want our mind to be to be where we want our mind to be about we want to be concerned about in our minds. And if you're thinking about your taxes in November, no one you know, you know, thinking about your taxes all the time, that really wants you what you want your mind to be about what you want your mind to be involved in. Even as such, you know, you kind of get caught by the cost by trying to make more money, you're caught by some relationship problem you're having, you're caught by, you know what to do with your car. And when all kinds of issues people get caught by, and there's some point independent valuation that goes on in spiritual life, but where you want your mind to be and randomness, your mind kind of wander wherever your fears and stresses and greed might take you. There's a willingness, I don't want to go there, like oh, that's like go. But some things are not so easy to let go of. So another thing that happens in meditation, and that is that some of the things we're concerned about, or like I said to her differently, or thinking might not disappear stuff. But our thinking gets thinner and thinner. It gets calmer and calmer, weaker and weaker. And so you might still be thinking about things and maybe having let go of things. But your car thinking about different things he might be concerned about. But the but the force of the thinking gets thinner and thinner and

thinner. Turns out he doesn't graduate quite as much it doesn't seem so substantial, so big so solid. And then probably somebody who had the sense of different intensities by which you can think and if you've never looked at your mind carefully maybe you haven't even seen that but I could imagine some things they could have happened to you on the way here today. Maybe your car starts smoking and your car's never smoked before I started clunking as well and you've managed to get to a park just your parking spots just nearby just in time you know before you thought the car was gonna explode. But you got here Great to see you can him meditate he's meditate and the intensity of your thinking about that car what's going to go and safe to drive home How am I gonna fix it's late at night I'm going to do to be quite strong. And, and other times you might come here and meditate and nothing's really grabs you nothing really important happening in your life isn't even grabbed you That's kind of big way. And so that your thoughts are much more kind of floating light, maybe pleasant even. But they're thinner, there's less energy intensity to them. They're more refined, more calm. So as meditation deepens, one of the things that happened is the mind gets, the thinking gets thinner and thinner, weaker and weaker, more transparent, less substantial, is less feeling less intensity, this is really important. You know, that, at some point is a feeling of that. Thoughts are kind of like clouds in the sky. At first, the cloud is cut sky is going to be completely covered with clouds, thick, dark clouds. But slowly as you meditate, the clouds begin to disperse, and evaporate and disappear. And you start seeing the vastness of the great blue sky. But there's still some clouds, they're drifting in the sky. But just kind of, you know, you start seeing this, the contrast of the greatest sky and the cloud. And you can see the contrast is only cloud Just kind of press professing perhaps and heavy. When you start seeing this, all this space, and you still have thoughts they arise. But when you see the space between the thoughts, you see the vastness, the peace, the calmness around it. And then it can be a very different relationship to our thoughts. If it's only you know, dense clouds covering the whole sky, that's all you might know is clouds. But when you see the sky, then you have a different relationship to the sauce. You see, there's a lot of peace and a lot of calm around your foot thinking, then there's a different relationship to your thoughts. For one thing that might happen is you begin stealing that. I don't have to pick that thought up. I don't have to get involved in that. I don't have to go into the fog and get wet. And so I thought might arise. You might have car thoughts. And oh, no thanks. in that car cycle comes and goes. Bye bye. might be more powerful thoughts that might be thoughts about your own death might arise my bubble up. And maybe that you think about your own death, maybe that's, that's a strong one that's strong cloud is a strong, strong spot and you jump on you get on involved, and then everything's clouded over again, or your mind when the mind is very calm and peaceful and concentrated, you might see just depth depth thoughts arising in your mind. And you say, Oh, I don't have to pick that up. I have to get involved in that and just let it float by and float out. Now one of the reasons why you might want to do that is you might have a sense that in this in the as you get calmer and more peaceful, that there's a sense of vast presence, a sense of well being or peace or stillness or luminosity or clarity or transmissivity or boundlessness. Limitless kind of quality, a lot of different descriptions of this. That is so much more satisfying, much more meaningful. Much more precious than a thought that's drifting by. And you feel that actually, it's a, you get diminished. By going and getting wrapped up in that thought. You might think that thinking that thought is so important. And if you don't think that thought, you know, I'm going to lose the great American novel, and then I'll lose the

Pulitzer Prize, you know, there's all these really important things. But all those things are just clouds. And, and they're important clouds, clouds are important. But, but there's this vastness is so satisfying, so peaceful, so wonderful. That's part of our nature part of who we are. And you kind of feel at some point, I don't need to go there. I don't want to go there. I have this better thing going on here. This beautiful thing happening, this vastness, this piece of this, whatever. And so at some point, there's a kind of a willingness to not pick up every thought that comes along and that helps the process. In the spinning a sauce anymore. Now it's really remarkable to begin realizing what thoughts are mean some, some thoughts or words or verbal thoughts, some thoughts or images we have different ways people think. But so much most of how people negotiate their life is through thinking or thoughts or concepts or ideas and, and our understanding of who we are, who the self is who I am, turns out to great degrees also be thoughts that arise. So I could be sitting here meditating. And I could have a thought about myself. I could think I am really the greatest Dharma teacher at this moment on the corner of Hopkins and birch. Wow. up in the corner and look, you know, and, and whether it's true or not, it's a thought, it's one of those clouds I can get into that cloud, get involved in it, dressed myself in it, you know, try to convince you that's true getting you know who you are, I can just see it as a cloud. Now, if I see it as cloud and let that cloud just evaporate and go, that sticks to their sense of self with Gil as the great Dharma teacher, as long as it wears it, I could kind of dig up another cloud perhaps, and they could have fear again. But he's kind of vanished. So there are all kinds of ideas. You know, like if you're a parent, maybe some of your parents or some of your children or some of your spouse's, your spouse or something or partner or something. All those are kind of valid concepts. But in order to experience and know them, There's also a cloud that arises in the mind's eye concept and idea. And we have to learn how to work and live with those concepts. We don't ignore them. But there's also the possibility in certain states of meditation, certain states, to just allow students just kind of not who we really are. We have to see ourselves as a mother or father or spouse or partner or, you know, worker, you know, or as someone who's successful person, unsuccessful person or worse a person, unworthy person, a great person, a lousy person, there's all these ideas we have about who we are and people suffer a lot awesome amount by these ideas, these thoughts that arise and even the thought, I am innocent enough. I am therefore I am. That's one response to I think, therefore, I am. I am even that in Buddhism is seen as kind of a fun You are with a think that you are is a thought so if you don't think that you are are you when a tree falls in the forest is there a sound when there's no thought because you're telling yourself who you are, are you and but you have this great peace this great vast luminous transparencies greater sense of Radiance that is there. As soon as you say, Oh, this is radiant. That's another cloud. So how do you enjoy it? If you can't tell yourself a story about it? You know, and we want to tell us a story about it. We don't ask to be good for our ego. We have to be able to tell our friends right look at me had this radium. But you can't do that if you kind of stay in the radiance because, you know, it's a thought that tells you right following me. So there's a standing out of thoughts happens at some point is realizing that maybe I also get involved in this. And there's a willingness to kind of let go of the more in the mind can get quite still, when you let go of thoughts. In Buddhism, sometimes it's called noble silence. When, when the mind is stop thinking. And stop thinking doesn't mean that we stopped existing. But what's great was replaced by this wonderful presence, this wonderful awareness. And in some circles, this wonderful awareness is celebrated as

what's ultimate, sometimes described as non dual. Because you can't have a self in that experience, as soon as you make yourself that experience in me. It's just another cloud, you've gotten caught up in that kind of self reflection. It's just kind of this kind of a oneness of this great awareness. So this is a disappearing of self. There's this non dual dual experience. And this might be some people conclude this is who I really am, this is a true self, when they come out and make a cloud, they say, Oh, this is a true self, this wonderful, luminous, great things of presence. However, in Buddhism, Buddhism is sense takes liberation one step further. And that is the, that evaporating or dissolving, the falling away, of even that wonderful luminous presence. It's a release from that also that also gets released. And, and it's very hard to describe this experience of Nibbana or Nirvana. That happens when even that sense of presence, that sense of luminosity or equanimity or peace also kind of falls away or drops away or evaporates or dissolves or just, you know, but if you can imagine, this great experience a piece that feels quite deeply satisfying, wonderful, nice. And it has a feeling of being boundless. You know, there's no boundaries to just close off now there's no center to it. There's no inside no outside is great feeling of transparency of peace. And maybe the sensitive pieces kind of going out. soundless, they kind of spread out. It's kind of experience really everything's reaping release, and release and being released and it's so satisfying, so wonderful. And then the next step is it that it releases itself. It just seems like so much natural next step that's release itself. And when the Buddha died, and when he was enough for absorption, he was into into this experience of peace and equanimity. And he left his consciousness he let his mind do that final release and in the final release, That is considered the ultimate of final liberation for Calipari Nibbana. What the Buddhist tradition says is that what happens to a person upon death in that final release is cannot be described cannot be talked about. You cannot make any logical statements about that person anymore. You cannot say that person has extinct annihilated is gone forever. You can't say that person is going to still exist in some way. Or they can't say the person doesn't exist you can't say does exist. You can't say the person either exists or doesn't exist. Can't say anything about it. So it's very confusing. It's very irritating because we want you know, we want some kind of thing and clarity. But the word Nirvana is sometimes said to be involved. extinguishing of a candle extinguishing of a fire. And that can seem like annihilation, why would I want to extinguish myself. But in ancient India and ancient Buddhism, the understanding of when a fire gets extinguished, the heat doesn't disappear, the essence of the fire doesn't disappear, but just kind of kind of gets reabsorbed, absorbed, you know, heat in the concentration of heat right? There thermodynamics, you know, the heat doesn't disappear into the universe, right? It's always there. So the same thing, kind of like when the fire goes out, it doesn't really the essence of it doesn't go out for kind of just gets absorbed back in. So it's not very good Buddhist teachings to say, but it's close. You can almost say there's not very good Buddhist teaching to say so I'll get criticized for saying this. But it's almost like with the death of someone who's enlightened, who has able to kind of do this release. It's kind of like the mind or the heart that consciousness goes home with It's a home, you know, just doing any good. But it's really glorious. It doesn't do any good because, you know, to have some kind of self reflective idea this is happening to me. It's just another thought and then the cloud, consumer clouds just make some sense. No way. So of course, there are other alternatives. There's a rebirth, there's the born heaven, the born Hell is all about alternatives that different religions will teach. The emphasis in Buddhism is the ultimate emphasis is not rebirth. It's not Heaven, Hell, but rather is to

bring the mind to this place where the mind can be at peace and release itself from all the things is attached to all things holding on to. And so when the mind is that free, then there's no buttons on it. There's no hooks in it. And we're not afraid of death. Not afraid of life. And then the mind becomes kind of like, like the image of trying to take water, watercolors and paint on a flowing river. You know, it doesn't stick, right? This painting doesn't work. So there's, you know, life still flows, but nothing sticks. There's no Velcro. So liberated mind, you know is one mind where there's there's no hooks, no belt from the buttons. And one of the advantages of that is that then death has no foothold. There's no fear of death that happens. And I think one of the most beautiful things that I know, there's a lot of beautiful things, but one of the one beautiful thing is those few those individuals have the fortune to go through a process of dying peacefully, and being out not knowing how to let go. So one of the things that happens in Buddhism and when we count when you're counseling someone helping someone with the dying process is often theirs. It is an emphasis try to help the person to let go, let go. But sometimes you say that over and over again, it's okay to let go, let go, everything's fine. Like, Oh, you want to hold on everything's okay. Just kind of constantly kind of encouraging them to let go. So they don't get frightened or angry or upset or distressed, you know, often can happen. Those kinds of junctures and but rather just kind of let it go, let's put the mind kind of, and it's kind of like a a candy, almost like a natural deep meditation experience that happens as you as you're dying. So I think that's one of the reasons why meditators on can be can be adept meditators are less afraid of death, is because there's something about deep meditation as a kin that's close to the experience of dying. And they've learned to work through a lot of fear willing to let go. So how is it do we deal With sickness, old age and death, what is our choices? And there's many different religious ideas about how we address these kinds of issues. Some people don't care about religious ideas, but still, you know, sooner or later we have to encounter these. And so how do we do it with wisdom with understanding with gracefulness? How do we do it in a way that's helpful for others? I knew a woman who died a few years ago and died of cancer and she had a nine year old daughter who she was very, you know, angry upset about, you know, I'm dying to stage for daughter's life. But by the end end of her life, she realized that that she was gonna die. And she would do her daughter a tremendous favor if she could die peacefully, rather than angrily or frightening Lee, and she did. And it was a beautiful thing for her nine year old to see my mother dying quite peacefully, serenely. It was a great gift, you know, so she was able to do something there that was actually helpful for others as well. So, at the essence, for those people interested in Buddhism offers, it offers a practice and a path that leads us to deal with some of the deepest questions that human being can have about their life deep issues and their human human beings life. You can practice Buddhism and practice Buddhism without that concern that interest, but I hope to see his talk this evening give you some indication of kind of a heart that what Buddhism is, can do and can help us to do. I'll end with two poems. One is by the Chinese poet oulipo. You've heard a lot about the skies and clouds the birds have vanished into the sky. And now Last cloud drains away. We sit together, the mountains and me until only a mountain remains. Here's a poem by a song by Tibetan teacher named lama guindon mpj. And it's a kind of thing that some kind of thing. Sometimes it's read to people as they're dying. There's a variety of readings, sometimes read, they're supposed to help with this process. And I don't know if this particular one is, but this is the kind of thing that sometimes it's done. And it might be interesting for you to hear it. And then maybe imagine, you know, maybe not

your deathbed, but imagine yourself at a time when you're Not much is gonna, how much is going on anymore for you. Not much you can do anymore. Magic itself, not much you can do anymore. But here you are. Happiness cannot be found through great effort and willpower. But it's already here in relaxation and letting go. Don't strain yourself. There is nothing to do. Whatever arises in the mind has no importance at all. Because it has no reality whatsoever. Don't become attached to it. Don't pass judgment. Let the clouds happen on their own, springing up and falling back without changing anything and all will vanish and reappear. Without End, only our searching for happiness prevents us from seeing it. Just like a rainbow which you run after without ever catching it, although it does not exist, is always been there and accompanies you every second. Don't believe in the reality is good and bad experiences. They're like rainbows. Wanting to grasp the ungraspable, you exhaust yourself in vain. As soon as you relax this grasping space is there. Open, inviting and comfortable. So make use of it. All is yours already. Don't search any further. Don't go into the industry, inextricable jungle looking for the elephant who is already quietly at home. Nothing To do nothing to force, nothing to want, and everything happens by itself. So part of the reason for me giving this talk tonight because I gave this talk yesterday and the talk was not recorded. And one of the people who wants to hear this talk again is Hilda as she prepares and as she goes, and this my my love and my respect for Hilda I really would like her as she goes through her stages now transition, that she realizes that it's safe to let go. It's beautiful to let go and this is not the time for her to hold on. Anyone, this is a time to let go. And someday it'll be yours. Thank you