

2007-09-30 The Seven Stages of Purification

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SPEAKERS

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So I have been teaching this two week retreat. And pretty much every day I've been giving a talk. And the talks for this retreat has been focusing on describing the Buddhist path in the most orthodox description of the path for Theravada Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism is the Buddhism of Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka. And there's many ways of describing the Buddhist path and British spirituality. But the one that has become over the centuries, the one that became somewhat sensitive, most influential for Theravada Buddhism is called the seven stages of purification. And there's a big book called The path of purification. It was written in the fifth century that kind of lays this out. And, you know, in ancient India, Buddhism, still maybe to this day, Buddhist it was not known as a religion. Partly because the word religion didn't exist back then. But, you know, it didn't cause religion. What Buddhism was called was it was called a Marga, or a maga was called a path, a path among paths among other Magus Margaux manga Margot's. And there were different paths being offered in India. Still to this day people offer Margot's offer paths. Some of you might be familiar with this term, a nun de Marga, which was an Indian Hindu tradition that was popular still around. They have a school in Palo Alto. And they used to and they said Buddhism is a path. And there within Buddhism there are a number of variety of descriptions of that path. different opinions about what the nature path might be. But I'm fond of the idea that a path describes development over time. And human beings have the capacity to develop themselves. If you look at children, you see the natural development as they grow as they develop the different capacities and understanding of the world. And there's a there's a variety of things get developed in children as they grow. There's a sense of socialization, who they are in relationship to other people. They're distinct from other people. There's moral sense moral development of children. There's a variety of things that develop over time. And there's no reason why this natural human development should be considered stopped at the age of 18 or 21. And, actually, there I think much of this kind of continues right up until the time of death. And some of you who are old enough to look back over a long adult life will probably be Recognize that you've also changed develops in the course of your adult life. So the idea of a spiritual path in Buddhism is not only to leave your development to chance, but it could also be be directed or settled on a particular if you don't choose the path you're going to be on, then the natural development of human beings will follow whatever path is forced by and available. And so some of us in this culture here, path of development is maybe not so that's offered by our culture's maybe not so healthy for everyone concerned. There's the, the path of consumption. For example, some people would love us to become better consumers. And so people become better consumers over time perhaps go into debt. The see if then my, my younger son's is in kindergarten here in Public School in Redwood City. And it's kind of interesting for me to watch how they, how they, you know, are, you know, teaching the kids from day one and kindergarten. And they have this kids are given this little, little journal simple journal that has each page has one sentence with a blank word. And then they have music and draw Big Lots of blank space so they can do drawings. And each day they come to class or they someone reads they can't read and you read to me reads the

sentence, and the kids have to fill in the blank and then write the word. And most of these sentences start with something like my favorite color. My favorite toy is my favorite food is my my mind. And

I've known I've heard I've read about Japanese coming to America and putting Kids in kindergarten and horrified by this approach to raising children, this emphasis on the self. And the other thing they do in kindergarten is they have star of the week week. And the course of the year, every kid gets to be the star of the week. And, you know, one week of the course of the year now, what does that do to a little fight, you know, a five year old, you know, that kind of promise a kind of, you know, you know, it's a guess I suppose to some scar circuit schools of psychology is supposed to create a stronger sense of self self esteem and all this. But as we've now learning, the whole self esteem movement of the 1980s and 90s is kind of backfiring. And people are realizing that this maybe wasn't such a good thing for some of these young people as they grew up. So you know, there is a path you know, development is offered and if we don't give it some conscious thought to how we're doing it with retro or going, society will offer it for us in various ways. And maybe it's not really to our benefit. So Buddhism offers a path and there are a number of different descriptions of this path. And the fact that there are a number of different descriptions means that we can hold them lightly. You know that think of it, this is a ticket to literally, some people follow these paths kind of step by step, some people follow them backwards. Some people follow them upside, you know, sideways, some people jump over big pieces of it, some people just jump right to the end and see what path the but there is a path that is classically offered. The so there are seven stages to this path. It's called the path of purification, process of purification. Some people in the West when they hear the language of purification, get quite cautious around it or maybe even aversive to it because because it reminds them a certain kind of puritanical approaches need to turn off a little bit, I think certain kind of puritanical approaches that I guess Puritan means pure, right? So that exists here in the West. And so it kind of fit has connotations that somehow you're sinful. People's kind of caution arises pretty quickly around the word purification. The idea of purification in Buddhism is a emptying, simplification, a cleansing of those things inside of us, that cause suffering, both to ourselves and to others. So there are inner forces of greed and hate and delusion, which when they're operating, can cause suffering to ourselves and can cause suffering to others. And if we allow these things to kind of keep operating on on cleanse the unpurified, unresolved unchecked in some way, it becomes a dangerous world to live in. And there's quite a contrast, you know, between the greed the hate of the Burmese dictators, military there, which is quite dramatic when it was in Burma, the stories I was told of the torture and the way the gruesomeness of what was going on there was quite dramatic. And the contrast to the to the monastics monastic monks and nuns a practice where there's a tremendous amount of goodwill, where greed, hate and delusion is not the operating fears, not the operating approach, but it's, you know, it's there's the purified and purified of that. Within Burma, it's very, very dramatic contrast. So, the first two stages of purification of cleansing or emptying, emptying of that which is extra not needed in our life is something which is shared by many religions not unique to Buddhism. The last five five can be considered unique to the path of the possum of insight meditation. So the first has to do with the purification of virtue, purification by virtue. And this also can raise puritanical worry about any emphasis on virtue. But one of the understandings of virtue in Buddhism is that you want to create the conditions so that you can feel good about yourself. So that when you sit down to meditate, there's a feeling of coming home to something which is enjoyable or good or wonderful here. And if a person doesn't have moral integrity,

then it's a little bit hard to sit down and feel good about what's going on here. And so I've seen people for whom sooner or later, their lack of moral integrity catches up to them when they meditate and even If they don't want to look at that part of their their life, sooner or later you sit down to meditate. Meditation is a process of becoming whole in moral integrity, and this integrity, lack of integrity has to do with being fragmented. And so as we as we kind of begin becoming more whole, it tends to, we tend to

encounter the places where there's lack of integrity. And it's hard to feel good about ourselves. So the one of the purposes of virtue in Buddhism is to create a good feeling here. And primarily, in this first purification, by purifying our behavior. Part of the idea here is that our behavior is easier to rectify, then our mind or our hearts. So we start where, you know, because it's ghost behavior. So we start there, and we look at our behavior and we try to not you know, be People up. And so we've been beating people up slowly having slug fights regularly we stopped doing that, because that's you know a lot easier to control your fists than your than your mind. So, Buddhist trifle live by the five precepts, not to kill, not to take what is not given. Not to engage in sexual misconduct, not to lie and not to intoxicate oneself. So, again, not so much because this is puritanical thing to do. But rather if you want to create a good vessel here, good, you know vessel here in our body and heart mind, for doing the deep inner work that meditation can call for. You want to kind of at least at least have your behavior set. So your behavior feels good, you feel comfortable about your behavior, how you live in the world. You might have been unethical in the past. That certainly should be looked at a little bit but Buddhism tends to encourage you not to look back not to get lost in what you've done in the past, make amends, do what needs to be done, but rather be content that if you've made a resolve from now, to be ethical, be happy for the decision you've made now. Or if you go on retreat, and you're living an ethical life, when they're treated, at least feel contented happy about that. So rather, it's more forward looking from now on just how we're going to live and then feel good about it, you're encouraged to feel good about having made that decision, as opposed to getting hung up of how you've been how you've acted in the past. Because being hung up, isn't that doesn't help this process. So the first is a purification of virtue. The second is the purification of mind. Now behaviors easier to rectify or purify or work with, then mental forces. So this is going to be the next step which is harder to do. And here this is understood to improve Concentration meditation, to develop one's concentration, perhaps here in the West, in order to Western psychological culture, in order to feel good about ourselves to create a clean, nice vessel here for the development of the inner life. Maybe psychotherapy is helpful for that process. Maybe that involves some of this purification of mind that the Buddhist do through concentration, meditation. Concentration meditation is very powerful. And in order to develop concentration, we have people have to kind of encounter a lot of the inner forces in their life that keep them fragmented, keep, keep them from being present, and keep them somehow agitated. And so for example, one of the tasks of this stage of purification is to overcome the forces of the mind that keep you pretty occupied in the past or in the future, or in fantasy. And maybe you don't realize how much you're preoccupied in those places, until you sit down to meditate. And then Wow, I had no idea I could spend so much time planning. I had no idea that I was so driven to always be thinking about the past in some way, or thinking about the future or just being lost in fantasy.

So then there's this inner development that has to happen, that we learn to let go of these things, these concerns. And we learn to focus the mind here and now on the present moment. So the purification of mind starts with this beginning to bring the mind into the present moment. For this to happen, it really helps. If the mind this little mind of ours has a really good understanding of the value of being present. If it doesn't understand that it's more valuable for you to be present, than to be in the future in the past. Why? Wouldn't want to do it. So there has to be some analysis, some wisdom around, that's really useful. And there's a lot to be said about that. But for now, I'll say one thing. That, to be alive is a marvelous thing. It's a rare thing. And for you to be alive is a relatively rare thing. And doesn't take long to realize to kind of go through kind of the history of your father's, you know, and your mother's sperms and eggs and how they met each other and realize it easily could have been other parallel universe, right? If it had been different sperm, a different month, you know, it could have been you would be could be really different person. And or if your parents had, you know, had met other people first. You know, we'd all be here except for you. Who knows where you're at and so For this particular person who used to be here now is really an amazing thing. And, and then to be alive, you know, how long do you have

to be alive? in the span of time? It's a blink of an eye. And so being alive is precious. Where are you really alive? Where does that happen? Is it gonna happen in the future? Maybe it's gonna happen in the future. Who knows? But it does not happen in the fantasy about the future. Did it happen in the past? Yeah, all of you have a past. But remembering your past is not living the live life, that remembering live life. The lived life happens here. And Buddhism emphasizes the live life. And as we enter the live life, the opportunities in the live life become a To us, and there's a variety of opportunities that spiritual teachings point to, that are available only if you're here. So the first task of this purification of mind is to understand the value of being present. And the second is to train the mind to start being present. Then as we start being more present, one of the things we encounter is those forces in the mind that obscure and make it difficult for us to really encounter the present moment in a full, clear way. The tradition the Buddhist tradition, calls these the five hindrances, the five obscures if you have a beautiful pond Lake, you can see the Alpine lake and it's completely still there's no wind and you can look at that beautiful reflection of the mountain in in the lake or you can look right into the lake you see right to the bottom. However, If someone puts a Dye red dye into the lake, then you don't see clearly you see through the filter of the red dye. If someone heats up the water in the lake and starts boiling, and so much boiling water on top, it doesn't create a nice reflection. It doesn't let you see deeply and if someone lets lots of algae ins, you know sludge and stuff, moss growing Lake, then you can see either and try to go through it or kind of clear the lake so you can see something it's really hard and messy and slow work. Or if huge wind whips up the surface of the lake, then, you know, there's all these waves and stuff and also again, you can't see or if the rain comes along and washes a whole bunch of mud into the lake is muds, all the lakes on muddy, you can't turn the clarity on the clearlake anymore. So those analogies are used for the five hindrances. If the mind is in the grip of desire, the first hindrance, it's like having rose colored glasses, and we can't really see what's really here. If the mind is in the grip of ill will, or anger, because like the mind is boiling, and again, you can't really see the mind very clearly you can't reflect what's going on in the world very clearly either. If the mind is

the logic, board resistance to what's going on, it's like how this heavy you know, algae is covering the clarity of the mind. And then if you know the mind if we're agitated and restless, it's like all this wind whipping up the surface of the mind. So again, the mind can't really see what's going on. Or if you're filled with doubt, or uncertainty or trepidation, then the it's like that, like the mind is full of mode and can't really make progress. So this purification of mind has has to do with somehow working through these hindrances. So these hindrances are no longer obscure our ability to see clearly. So they don't obscure our ability to contact reality in a direct, unmediated way. So the mind becomes a clear instrument for meeting our reality seeing what's here. So the first task is to be here. The second is once we're here, the second task is to somehow clean the windows of the mind. So the mind can see clearly what is here. So these two stages are shared by many different religions. And they're very powerful stages. And they can involve tremendous amount of self learning and transformation, especially the concentration part. Sometimes a tremendous amount of inner critic ears, people who do the inner work to work through a lot of the complex psychology, psychological forces that the governance drivers that keep us from being settled. They keep us fragmented. Once we've managed to this temporarily to overcome all these forces and hindrances, then we start the path of insight, insight meditation. And the first stage of insight meditation is called the purification of view. View means kind of the purification of your perspective. How you look what you look for, when you look at reality. Once I went to Aikido never wanted to go back again. And I went into this fix big, you know, big big furniture store and was walking around this big furniture store. And it's kind of after a while, I realized it's like a maze. And after a while, I realized I don't want to be here. And then the question was, how do I get out?

So I don't know how I, someone told me or if I kind of figure it out, but I was pointed to there's this line on the floor, like a yellow line is it and there's a line on the flesh, if you follow that line, the yellow brick

line, follow that line. And, and then you know, you follow what your, you know, takes you around. It takes a lot of trust to believe this line is going to take you out but eventually it takes you out. So in order to find your way out, you had to shift your perspective, my perspective, from the beds and the couches and the table and all the stuff that mesmerizing and, and have actually look, look at something else which is the path. Look at the you know where it is. So it's a reasonable thing in life, to somehow change our perspective change what we focus on, so we can find our way so this so this purification of view begins with a changing perspective. But when we look at how we look at our life, with the idea that some of the usual perspectives we have are not so useful, maybe not even accurate. So the perspective that's offered in when we start the practice of insight is to see that there are two things always going on. There's our experience. And it's the mind that knows that experience. So there's kind of a distinction that's made. In concentration practice, that distinction tends to fall away, and more like become one with the deep concentration practice you become one with what you're focusing on. In insight meditation. You start teasing apart of seeing that there are two different things going on. There's experience and there's a knowing that you're having that experience, you know, things connected to know so the maybe it's a little bit the distinction between hearing and listening. You can hear something. But when you listen, there's a little active activity in your, your part, intentional part where you're actually engaged and listening. So you know, there's the, there's the, there's what you're listening to. And then there's listening, the mind that listens to different things. And if there's no sound, and you're trying to listen, you're only the only thing going on is your part, the mental part. When you hear, then there's a two parts going on together. So there's these two things are distinguished. And so teasing apart is very important. It's connected to teasing apart. Also our interpretation of experience, from an experience itself what it is, and as probably most of you know, it's very easy to have an interpretation of events of what's going on. In the present moment, that's not accurate. You're waiting on the corner of 32nd and Third Street for your friend, your friend is late. And How could your friend be so late? This is no good lousy friend who's always, you know, standing you up. Here, yours is really disrespectful, you're going to tell it give your friend a good word. This is really terrible. Finally, you check the original note that says, you know, and doesn't say 32nd. And third, it says 3030 seconds. And you realize that there's a whole build on this whole interpretation about what this event meant, where you actually had the faulty information. Or maybe you had the right information. But you find out that your friend actually tried to be there on time, but was in an accident on the way there. And so suddenly, all your anger and your interpretation is being disrespectful falls away. So a very important part of the process is being able to distinguish between the interpretation and what's actually going on? What's going on is you're standing on 32nd. And third, to sunny day, you have this appointment to meet someone, that person is not there. That's all kind of what's happening, then there's an interpretation over that. This means that so that starts it can start a very gross very large kind of things like that. But it also gets closer and closer to the moment to moment experience in meditation. So for example, you're sitting and meditation and you might have an itch and the mind says, this must be skin cancer.

And I need to find a doctor. And the mind gets involved in interpretation, just a niche. The you're sitting watching your breathing As you're breathing, the you know, your breath is kind of shallow. What's happening is a shallow breath, the mind that interprets this, this is a symptom of psychological, ill health. This must be someone who's really uptight, who has a shallow breath. I don't belong in California.

So, you know, so you know, this, you know, so there's layers of interpretation, the top of this, you know, it's just a shallow breath. And then there's, you know, concepts that go on top of that. So, as we enter this world of insight, we're being beading to tease apart concepts interpretations, from the actual experience. And as it gets closer and closer, then we see more more clearly That there is an experience. And there's a knowing of it. Very simple. There's a experience of pressure. And there's a

knowing there's pressure, there's a sound, there's a knowing of hearing the sound. There's a thought, you know, you're having a thought, there's a feeling and you know, you have that feeling. The knowing is not the same thing as a feeling and knowing how the same thing as a thought. And that distinction becomes a very important one for Vipassana practice. This is called a purification review of perspective. So you're pointed Look at this, look at this difference, see if you can see it in your experience. The next purification is purification of doubt. And this is a very important one because as we begin separating out our experience this way, one of the things that one of the concepts we tend to overlay on our experience is the concept of self. Me Myself in mind, and it seems innocent enough, innocent enough, but it's still an activity of mine. The overlays are experienced with an idea, a concept. Sometimes it's more or less an accurate concept, you know, the image is my image. But even the activity of saying this is mine is is a is an activity of mind, which sometimes sometimes obscures really being able to see clearly what is actually going on here. And so, people can have a lot of doubt, when they enter this world of the direct experience, because whereas the self where am I in instead of realizing I is interpretation. And so, part of this is to kind of shed the doubts that we might have, that allows us to shed the interpretation of self that we overlay on experience. So again, we can see more clearly what is actually here. One of the things that gets overcome in this purification of doubt, or things that happens is we start seeing the cause and effect relationship between things When you start seeing the difference between experience and the mind, you can see for example, that there's an itch. And that itch is a condition for thinking about cancer. We can we can hear a sound and see that's a condition for a loud sound condition for maybe his shoulders tightening up, we can see the arising of a thought. And we can see that's a condition for you know, tightening of the valley. We can see this as cause and effect relationship. And what's really amazing as you get closer and closer, you can see how much of this happens without any direction from you. Without any willing and intentionality. In Buddhism we say it happens selflessly. It's amazing how much of our experience happens self if you're sitting very quiet and pay attention and you

because you know, so You know, it's I feel cold, they walk into some place with cold and the body tightens up a little bit. It was in the world It wasn't chosen by the by the by ourselves. It's selfless in the sense that it wasn't the decision to quick tighten up. And we walk into the sun. And, and we relax. We see Oh, that wasn't well, there's just kind of nature of how things are. We hear a bell. If you're in retreat at 12 o'clock, you hear a bell, and you think lunch. And then that's when the lunchtime is 12 o'clock. So it's kind of it wasn't it wasn't a choice you made to think lunch, you just kind of popped up in the mind. It's a reason we say it's a selfless activity of the mind. To have this word this concept lunch appear. So start seeing how much things happen. selflessly. And if you're in retreat and deep meditation, and you tease apart the layers and layers of concepts we live under normally, then it's amazing how much of our experience and what goes on in US happens in a selfless way. The next purification is called a purification, two minutes to finish. It's a long path.

The next step is a purification of what is and what is not the path. And this is a very important one because as people get into meditation practice and get deeper, deeper, they start having spiritual experiences. And this is the part of the path you understand. That's having spiritual experiences is not the path, not the purpose. It can happen as you go. Long, but there can be a great experience of luminosity of light. There can be great experiences of bliss and joy. There can be great experiences of knowledge of understanding. People can amazing understanding of life in themselves. And this is if I understand, I'm the Einstein of spiritual Buddhism. There can be great experiences of faith and confidence. There can be great experiences of effort and energy, just you feel like you'd like this tremendous flow of energy and effort to seem selfless and dynamic and just feels this is it I must have arrived. This is enlightenment. There can be great states of mindfulness, there can be great states of equanimity. There's a variety of wonderful things that we call spiritual experiences. No spiritual

experience, is it for the Buddhist path and very important to not cling to any of these experiences. Because clinging is not the core definition of the path Buddhism is that path that leads to non clinging. So if you cling to something, it's not the path. And non clinging is not an experience. It opens the door to variety of experiences if you don't cling, but non clinging is not an experience. So when you realize that the path is found in non clinging, rather than the spiritual experience, that you've attained the purification of what is and is not the path. Once you've done that, the next purification is called purification of practice. And this is what used to be do the practice, do the practice day in day out, just keep doing it. And as you do this, the practice begins purifying us it's like it's like purifying gold. You know, heating it up into dross comes out, your student the practice day in day out, you know what the practice is just keep doing it. As we do this, greater insight occurs And the primary insights of the insight into the insights for insight meditation is insight into the impermanent nature of phenomena. It's one of the key ones in our tradition, also the selfless nature of all phenomena, very important for us. When the purification of practice has gone along far enough, then at some point, there's the purification of what's called knowledge and vision, the purification, where we the mind finally releases the last vestiges of clinging. And there's a real knowing of the mind that's free of clinging. And with that, knowing is direct and immediate. That's why the idea of vision is connected to its knowledge and vision. But the vision I think, for me is very important also, because with the experience of awake Anything that can occur, there arises a vision and the various points along the practice. Many of you have some kind of experience. It gives you a vision of a possibility of a capacity you have. you've tasted it, you've intuited it, you had a glimpse of it. And it shows you that it's possible to integrate this freedom more fully into the rest of your life into the fullness of your life. That there is this, you know, there's a vision of a possibility that if this practice can lead you further into the full integration, of liberation, freedom, so that is not something that's separate from who you are. So that you're that the inner processing of your life and the freedom of the mind become one in the same. Early in the stages of awakening, there can be a difference between mind which is selfless, which is purified which is clear, which is sometimes independent of experience, and then the inner processing of our personality or old habits and all that. And there can be a lot of freedom and seeing all these old old habits of stuff are not really have freedom, but they still operate. Buddhism is not contend with letting those operate with the mind kind of somehow overarching mind kind of

free, that wants to somehow bring these into harmony. So that the inner the inner personality becomes the awakened mind the awakened mind becomes the personality in a sense. So then, after this purification of knowledge and vision, there's a vision of what's possible, and then the practice continues. And the practice continues, until this work of harmonizing or bringing to completion is completed. So, we say That before realization, we practice after Realization, we practice. Practice, practice, practice. And so rather than focusing on an experience, or even on realization, it's maybe more important to keep just focusing on practice, to interest ourselves in practice, trust the practice, to ourselves to practice, just keep practicing, practicing the, you know, the honesty, the non clinging, the compassion, which defines the path. And if we ever get to the end of the path, great. If we don't get to the end of the path, it's been a good life. It's been a good practice, practicing honesty, non clinging and compassion. That's pretty good. Pretty, pretty, pretty privileged thing to do to spend one's life doing that. So This famous book called The path of purification, lays out this path or seven stages. It begins the whole book begins with a poem. And it goes the entertaining something like the inner tangle, the outer tangle, though this whole world is tangled in a tangle. Who is it? That can untangle the tangle. And then now that this whole big book, the seven stages of purification describes how this untangling is done. So, may you all get disentangled so you can Tango Thank you