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SPEAKERS

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It's my custom at the beginning of the year first Monday evening talk of the years to give a talk on the Four Noble Truths. And this year I thought of doing that, but to do it a little differently than I have in the past. And that is to offer a series of talks for Mondays or January, on some of the core teachings and principles of Buddhism. So a little bit like introduction to Buddhism kind of series. And so tonight, the idea was to talk about the core teachings of Buddhism. And since the Four Noble Truths is right at the core of the core teachings, I'll cover that as well.

I think most people know that Buddhism began with the Buddha who did not claim that he invented Buddhism, he, what he said was he rediscovered an ancient path, he discovered something that maybe has always been true. There wasn't the invention. But it begins with a person. The Buddha, we don't know much about the Buddha. There's certainly a lot of myths that have grown up about him. And we don't even not even sure what his given name is. The name siddhartha doesn't appear in the records until about 500 years after his death. So can we be sure that that was really his name? And the word Buddha is a title like the word Christ as a title. And Buddha means the one who is awake and to Buddhism is the ISM of being awake. Wake ism, awake ism. So what do you practice I practice awake ism. That's quite nice right? being awake and not trouble anybody you know cause any problems for people if you practice awake. So the so there are a lot of stories about the Buddha and it's hard to know, differentiate history from myth. But I'm quite fond of the myth. Because myth sometimes tell teachings, principles which are more colorful than sometimes reality. And this kind of make them more poignant, much more stronger points. In the case of the Buddha, it said that he lived a privileged life and he chose to leave that privileged life in order to try to discover for himself a solution or a escape or a Solutions the best word to the common most common existential struggles that human beings have to face. Sooner or later, I think pretty much everyone has to face sickness and death. And if you're lucky, you face old age, sickness, age or old age and death. And he didn't want to accept this as just given part of life exactly, because he saw that it brought him suffering and got some anxiety. And it certainly was quite distressing to people around him. And so he wanted to find the path, the path of privilege that he knew, somehow didn't have the answers for him, got the privilege somehow didn't have the meaning perhaps sometimes it doesn't for people in the modern world as well. Either. Sometimes I know plenty of young people who grew up in privilege and choose something else as adults. Choose a different route. I know plenty of people who through hard work and attained a life of success, financial success, career success, and then at some point they decided that it wasn't didn't measure up to what they're hoping for. It didn't have the same value, that the deeper value that they're hoping to imbue their life with. So the Buddha set out to somehow deal with these existential issues that he had confronted when he was about in his late 20s. And the route that he took, which was probably one of the only routes available to him at the time, remember, this is 2500 years ago, they were there was no IMC back there. He was go down this go down the street and get some teachings. They were no books, you know, you

can go down to Kepler's bookstore and get you know, the latest and greatest books on Buddhism. There was very little options. There was no schools universities to go to like They have now. And so the only option was really available for him was to become a renunciant. And there was a tradition in his time of becoming renunciant. of religion being someone who left behind the so called household life and life of being in relationships, having children, sexuality, having life, possessions, life, what kind of radical simplicity. And some people have likened little bit to the life of some of the Greek philosophers who you know as a way of life for them, and many of them live pretty simple life in the pursuit of truth in pursuit of a deeper way of life.

The Buddha's first efforts to get to the bottom of these existential issues was through meditation practice. Particular forms of meditation practice that he figured at some point. He succeeded at them attained this meditation practices that were being offered to him. And he found that they didn't have any meaning, or they didn't install the suffering issue, the issue of suffering he was trying to address. And so he looked further afield, and one of the most common, one of the strong traditions of his time was a tradition of asceticism. And there's a variety of philosophies around asceticism. One of them was that if you did enough asceticism, tormented your body enough, you could burn off all your bad karma. And when you have no more karma, not your bad karma, your good karma to burn off all your karma. And when you no longer had any karma that was going to stick them to you and kind of weighing you down, it set you free. And in one of the important one of the very important traditions of this time, was the giant tradition which still exists in India today. And to be set free, totally free, was synonymous with dying. So your term was completely exhausted, you died and kind of went to some kind of liberated state. And he, so the Buddha tried asceticism as well. And at some point he decided this was not going to help him with his search for a solution to transcendence or transformation of suffering. Now, I think it's quite significant to reflect that what the Buddha was looking for was some kind of solution to suffering. That was a term he was that was the kind of glucose the word. He was not looking for something which was what we could call kind of supernatural. many religions have a super supernatural element to them. You want to discover God, and that's the whole point. Or you want to say you want to you want to discover perhaps the true nature of consciousness, you know, cause Consciousness perhaps, or oneness with the universe or some larger kind of principle, Supernatural, transcendent kind of principle. The Buddha in a sense, was was looking at something which everyone can relate to, which is suffering is very few people who would claim that they don't suffer. And suffering is something that you can experience for yourself. God, a lot of people wonder if God exists, you can't really some people have no clue how to experience God normally can't see God. There's a lot of things. There's a kind of supernatural world that people don't see in the same kind of practical ways you can see suffering, the suffering is tangible. So that what the Buddha was looking for was something it was a solution to make tangible, something we all can experience. So it's very human. And I'm actually quite fond of how human or how kind of basically human or practical Buddhism tends to be so then he, he decided to give up the asceticism. And he engaged in once again in a path of meditation. But now if a different angle, and the angle he took now was rather than starving his body, tormenting his body, he was going to take a path of what he could call meditative pleasure and joy. sorrow, because they said it tradition, try to avoid joy and pleasure and sensual pleasure, pleasure that you got from stimulating the senses was a little bit taboo in those ancient renunciant traditions. So that was out of the question. You couldn't go get a massage. But he could. But meditation provided an inner sense of well being. That was, in a sense, a sense free sensation free wasn't being stimulated was rising because your sensations are being stimulated. You weren't seeing something Beautiful, hearing something beautiful, feeling something beautiful. It arose kind of from the inner inner life, rather than from the, with the might sensory life. So he thought that might be a way. And so he started practicing meditation that brought him a fair amount of calm, stability and well being. And from this vantage point of this calm, stable well being, he began having insight,

insight into what he called the nature of his life nature of kind of how life is structured, how life occurs, or more specifically, he started to get insight into how suffering occurs in human life.

And this is where myth comes in again, because one of the myths that no, I may make it I guess, whenever, whenever you call a religious tradition, we say that religion Christian has myths. I suppose it's disrespectful to the tradition, right? Because they don't think it's a myth. Except I'm not one of you know, I'm one of them. So I guess I could say it. So the myth. So the first thing that first insight he had in the process of his awakening was in this mythic version of it was he saw his past lives and says he saw life after life after life going back back back. They call, you know, a phenomenal length of time. And he just saw the sequence of his lives. The second thing he saw was, he saw that and all the people around him and all the beings around him, they would die and get reborn, and they got reborn, according to how they live their lives. The ethical principles are the intentional motivations that guided their lot, their lives. So what he saw was, in those two insights, he saw life as a process. And he saw it as kind of a cyclic process of rising, arising and passing away arising and passing away. And he saw that that process of rising passing away was the was, was being driven, or being perpetuated by people's intentional life by what was motivating their minds, minds, they were motivated by greed, they would reach out in order to get reborn, whatever the nature of the intention, the quality of that intention, the fact of the quality of that rebirth, so someone who harmed other beings might end up in a rather unfortunate rebirth. Those who did wonderful things that actually acts of generosity and kindness to others will get reborn in in beautiful states of being afterwards so The quality of the rebirth was affected by the the, the ethic and how ethical their life was. Now, prior to the Buddha, it said that there was an India a theory of rebirth. And also prior to Buddha much broadly in India, there was a theory that people got when they die, they went off to some kind of heavenly realm. That was maybe somewhat vague about, but there was no sense that how when lives went live, when ethics ethical integrity, which was later lives was life, affected that process of rebirth. And so what we have contributed to this kind of Indian theory of kind of what happens to you when you die, is he said there's an ethical quality that affects that process. How you live affects what happens next. It's kind of like it you set up a habit, and in based on your disposition, that disposition affects how you get what happens next. So he became interested in this. So what he saw he saw life as a process. And whether we believe in these past lives or not, still he saw it because seeing life as a process, and the process that was motivated by the quality of our mind, what was going on your own mind, right intentions, the motivations, the quality of what we wanted, and did not want it. And then as he looked more deeply, he had a third insight. And this is the insight which is considered to be uniquely Buddhist, the Buddhist contribution to all this. And what he saw was that one of the key things that perpetuated the process of life and death or the process of suffering, been caught in the work the world or the process of suffering, was he saw, I was sick, he saw the suffering. And the process of rebirth was clearly a process and you saw how that process function so rather than seeing who he really is who He really was, rather seeing the true nature of self, rather than seeing the true nature of God or true nature of reality, what he saw was he saw the true nature of the process, which gives rise to suffering. And he saw that if you, if you took some of the elements away from the process, the suffering would drop away. It's kind of like if you have a product of two numbers, if you take away one of the numbers and try to, you know, if it's x times y , and U and y becomes make y zero, then the product is 02. Right? That works in mathematics. So, or to say it in different kind of mathematical way.

There was a strong tendency in Indian religions, to see that the world of impermanence was a world suffering and but the equation prior to the Buddha among some people was that impermanence the world of impermanence equals suffering. So in order to not not have suffering, you have to take away the impermanence side of the equation, which led to a lot of transcendent kind of thinking, we force it leave the world entirely, in order to become liberated, not anything to do with the world. The Buddha, I

think, had a little different equation. And that would be that suffering, impermanence, times clinging equals suffering. And so, you didn't have to get rid of the world of impermanence. In order to end suffering. You had to bring the clinging to zero. And then, the impermanent world of impermanence would not lead to suffering. So what he saw was he saw a process by which clinging operates. And the simplest formulation in that process is the Four Noble Truths. And the Four Noble Truths starts with suffering. So suffering is the issue that the Buddha was trying to address. That's why he left his privileged life to become or don't seem to deal with the issues of suffering, that sometimes, too, and to understand the gravity in which this issue of suffering, it's often equated with sickness, old age and death. So that's, that's, so that's the first noble truth that you know the truth of suffering there is suffering. The Buddha did not say that life is suffering. That's the same thing as saying impermanence equals suffering. He did not say that. But there is suffering in life. That life is not suffering. There might be a lot of suffering in life might be so much for some people that they could just about say life is suffering. But it's very important not to say that because if you say that, then, you know, it's the only way out is complete rejection of the world. So the but the first noble truth is the truth of suffering. And there's a practice associated with the first noble truth. So it's not just simply a truth that you chose to believe like a tenant of religion. It's meant to be more like an orientation, or a frame of reference. If what you want is liberation from suffering. You need to have a certain framework orientation or map by which to kind of negotiate your way through life to find the goal of liberation. And that map without orientation begins by becoming sensitive to suffering, to tuning into it, getting to know it, so the practice session The first noble truth is the practice of getting to know your suffering. So the bumper sticker for Buddhists would be I stopped for suffering. And now, it's, we'll see later in this talk, hopefully, that this is not such a depressing endeavor, but is supposed to be something that we engage in with great hope and possibility that this is actually kind of a very positive message because it's a message of leads to us liberation from suffering. So the second noble truth is a truth that says that suffering arises from clinging from grasping. The second noble truth does not say that suffering arises from desire. There's plenty of even books in the West that will try to say that Buddhism teaches that suffering is a source of desires as well. of suffering. The Buddha clearly did not say that he was very careful with a word he chose to describe as a source the origin of suffering, the cause of suffering. He used the word thirst. thirst has his quality of kind of compulsion of grasping of clinging. Okay, givenness doesn't have a grip Enos, you can have desire. Without compulsion, you can have desire without suffering. I can have you know, I can have a, you know, my desires like a diamond doesn't these gonna roll out of my mind like, no one's business. But most of them I just let them roll away. You know, here they go. And they go, you know, I don't pick them up. They don't cause me any suffering at all. Just you know, come along and easy come easy go.

Some desires are quite healthy to have. So, you know, we don't You know, it's kind of inconceivable to have a life without desire. Nowadays, I think there's a strong tendency to associate people who don't have any desire as being depressed. So, the point is not to get rid of desire. But the point is to understand that, that there's certain kind of desire a particular kind of desire called clinging or grasping or drivenness or compulsion, which gives rise to suffering. To say this in a different way, maybe upside down in a way that's maybe makes it a little bit clear is rather than saying for suffering and massage, and then the cause of suffering is clinging. I like to say it this way. If you claim you will suffer. If you let go of that clinging, you let go of that suffering. So if you claim You will suffer, let go of that clinging, the suffering goes away. So the task in Buddhism is then, so that the task, the practice or the second noble truth is to see clearly the nature of grasping. And to let go of it. The third noble truth is the complete letting go, the cessation of that suffering, the experience of letting go. This is the kind of the good news in Buddhism, that it's possible to overcome suffering. And today I was talking to someone who is going to teach mindfulness at a very prestigious psychiatric school in San Francisco, Beijing University in San Francisco. And she was had all the psychiatrist around she was kind of introducing what she was going

to do. And she said something like, you know, mindfulness has become quite popular in our culture. You're now stress reduction and pain management. And but you know, that's not the original thing that was designed for. And that we do kind of we kind of shortchange ourselves. That's, that's all we use mindfulness for. The real purpose of mindfulness, and its Buddhist context, is to bring suffering all suffering to an end. And this woman, she was telling me this Sunday, she gave that talk. All the psychiatrists, their mouth dropped open. And she experienced it was they were just kind of in Austin, that anyone would, that was a possibility. Grabbing, they said, they said, mostly what we do is we medicate people. So it's the good news. The and because it's not easy to let go of clinging, it's easy to say you should let go of it. It's hard to do. There is then the fourth noble truth. And the fourth noble truth is there's a path there's a way that a process to engage in that can help you dislodge that clinging. Some clinging can get dislodged easily and quickly, some takes a lot of time, and a lot of deep inner work a lot of challenging himself, to be wrestling with himself, even in order to get down to the bottom of the places we'll be playing, there was let go of them. So the Buddha offered a path. Now in all four of these, he is still talking about a process is a process. Because suffering is not you know, if suffering which is a thing that existed in the world in a solid way, like a piece of granite, you know, just there, you're born with it and you have a certain amount and you die with it. Then, then there's not much you can do. But because it's part of a process, you can engage that process and change the process or you can bring that process to an And so it I can't underscore enough how much the central teachings of Buddhism are process oriented rather than essence oriented. Buddhism doesn't look at essence in terms of substantial essences of things, the true nature of the self, the true nature of reality, the true nature of ultimate reality, whatever. But it's trying to look at something in some ways more humble, which is, what is the process by which we suffer? And how can we work with that process to bring suffering to an end. So then there's a variety of teachings in Buddhism that then expand on this. These principles of process expand and bring a greater greater understanding of this process, different angles, different perspectives, but they all have perspectives on process, how to work the process.

They day four path is a simple, simplistic way of encapsulating a whole series of practices a person can engage in that begin shifting and changing the inner processes of your mind towards healthier processes. So, you know, someone who doesn't do any kind of inner work at all, may or may not have helped that healthy inner processes, mental processes, and there's quite a few people have quite healthy, unhealthy ones. The argument would be anybody who suffers has an unhealthy mental process going on. And so, we wanted to take some responsibility for what goes on your mind. And this side says, Buddhism is also has a very positive view of the human mind, human heart to mind hearts the same, in that it sees it as a process, the processes can be changed. system, the mind is not a thing in Buddhism. It's an activity or a series of activities. And as its activities, the activity videos can be shifted and changed, it's quite malleable. If the mind was a simple, hard, fast thing, then you know you can't change it can't move it around. In other words, to use a modern analogy, the mind is software. And the software can be reprogrammed. We changed, three done. And it kind of funny away perhaps, maybe not quite right. But Buddhism doesn't believe in any hardware. It's all it's all software.

So so one of the core teachings of Buddhism is a teaching of karma. And you can begin appreciating why issue of karma is central. When you know that you understand that the process is so important, because karma has to explain is tries to explain how this process unfolds over time. So, it's at its most basic idea. Karma teaches that our actions what we do is consequential. That so it's a lot of people believe that in ordinary life, if you're going to learn to play a musical instrument, like a piano, you start playing the piano, you practice your practice, with some kind of belief that if you practice you'll get better. Most people don't practice unless they believe they're going to get better. To believe you can get better by practicing is to believe in karma. To believe that your actions have consequences, and more specifically to believe that you can also also train yourself in certain skills. Your mental ability to play a

piano is an activity you're tapping into activities of the mind. And they're malleable enough that you can change and train what's going on. So, in order to engage in this path of liberation that Buddhism teaches, you have to have confidence or a certain level of belief that what you do is, is consequential. So we're going to train ourselves in a variety of different trainings in order to develop ourselves. So one of the key trainings in Buddhism is the trainings in kindness and compassion. And so once you kind of understand the Four Noble Truths and principles, ways to look at your life, you look at suffering, you look for the clinging you look for the possibility of release. Once you understand that's a valuable kind of framework for looking or map for looking at our life. The next task Understand that is to engage in this practice to evoke an attitude and approach of kindness and compassion. That's the second step of the Eightfold Path. So rather than taking suffering as being this big downer, you understand suffering and then we try to elicit whatever degree of kindness and compassion towards yourself and others. As we set out a path to try to make a difference to try to shape shift our mind sort of mind can move towards freedom. And then, the middle stages of a pull tab have to do with our behavior, ethics, and living a life of integrity. Now, it's not really because it's the moral thing to do, but rather an ethical life creates the conditions in the heart and mind that makes it easier for the heart and mind to be stable and insightful. If you spent a lot of time lying and stealing, chances are you'll get you'll be agitated. Chances are, you'll be stuck a little bit numb, chances are you'll be a little bit disconnected from yourself. If you want to be awake and clear, if you want to be calm, and sensitive, and connected, it really helps to live an ethical life. And it's quite remarkable to watch people who do a lot of mindfulness meditation or by Buddhist practice, that their their ethics tends to come better and better over time. Because as they get more sensitive, they realize that if they do something unethical, it kind of just messes up the water, kind of kind of doesn't doesn't support support this process of developing greater inner integrity, stability, and ability to kind of get deep into the mind. So I think it's a natural thing for people to engage in Buddhist practice. As a practice develops, they become more ethical. Some people choose to become more ethical first, in order to support the practice, and some people practice first and then let their ethical development follow in the wake of the practice. Either way, it's fine as long as you don't cause harm. And then the last three parts of a full path has to do with the mental development. So the middle path has to do with your, your behavior, adjusting your behavior, changing and making behavioral changes in your life. And the last three have to do with now beginning to engage in the inner processes of your life and the mental processes of your life.

And so this is taking some responsibility for what goes on in your mind. And realizing that we can take responsibility we can adjust we can change because on the left take what's going on the mind is a given. I know that for many of us We might suffer, be depressed or upset about something. And we could spend a lot of time trying to think and feel and address and do something to try to make a difference. And it just seems like it just locked in there. But it's certainly possible with a variety of different practices of mindfulness of concentration and calm, to be able to begin dislodging and loosening up the structures of the mind. So they're not frozen, it becomes softer and softer. And so eventually, we can kind of get down and see how the process works and see what is extra. What can be taken out of that, that that equation. As I say, in my intro class, certain emotions are frozen in us. So for example, resentment is frozen anger. And if something is frozen, it's hard to really get in there and make a difference. But if we can, can thought the ways in which the mind is frozen, then we can start letting things begin to move again. And once they be moving, then we're back into the process. And once they're back in the process, we can start making a difference in that process shaping it affecting it. So big part of Buddhist spiritual life is helping a thawing process occur. And one of the important ways that happens is through a lot of kindness and compassion, and also through a lot of presence. Just being present, being fully present for experiences. And this kind of full presence has a lot to do with no longer adding constriction around what's happening in our life, just be present in an open way, being

present. So then there's this development of the mind that goes on and has a lot to do with mindfulness has a lot to do with concentration.

So after the Buddha, right after the Buddha was enlightened, he decided to go teach five of the people, his pilot his companions, who had accompanied him during his many years of ascetic practices, so fellow ascetics and when the Buddha had given up his ascetic practice, he had received from someone a gift of very rich, creamy rice porridge, and he drank it in order to get strength. And his fellow ascetics were disgusted by his, how he'd renounced his asceticism, and, I mean, he imagined for an ascetic, you know, that's kind of really that's pretty bad, right? So they left him in disgust. And he decided to find them after his enlightenment or teach them he thought that they were actually fairly highly developed in their spiritual life, and that he could go and teach them. When they saw him coming in the distance, they made a pact among themselves. They said, Here comes that guy who's, you know, has, you know, gone soft conduct to the soft life? Let's, let's not stand up into them. Let's just stay in our seats stay present, and kind of maybe kind of ignore him I guess. And as he approached, as the story is told, as he approached, they were unable to keep their pact. As they approached, there was something about his presence that compelled them to stand up and greet him and offer him a seat. Something about his presence. So it's easy to read the principles and the teachings of Buddhism and books. And some of them can seem quite lofty some they can seem quite a substract some of them can seem very logical. It's a whole different thing to be in the presence of someone who's free to hold everything to be in the presence of someone who's practiced. And there's a variety of things we can pick up from someone's presence. So with his presence there, and, and that sense of presence, got these five companions to start to be willing to listen to what he had to teach. And then he taught the Four Noble Truths. And that said at the end of that first teaching, one of the ascetics got it We set free. So this juxtaposition between presence, the presence of freedom that's so immediate, that's here. It's not abstract. It's palpable. It's kind of in the air. And then this teaching that points towards how to reach that radical presence. That combination, I think, is quite significant. So not to hold on to just abstractions, but not to hold that it's just the presence without an explanation of their path, but to bring those two together. And so the Eightfold Path is a path that converges, that leads to that collapses on to the presence of liberation to liberating liberate, liberate, liberating or liberated presence.

What that presence or what that experience of liberation is, the Buddha did not teach much about the core teachings of Buddhism doesn't do not says very little about what a liberated person is like, what that deliberate deliberate experience is like. And that's led a lot of people to a lot of frustration. It's led to a lot of pink ink as people try to guess, what it might be like. But I think it's more productive to consider why the Buddha did not teach much about what liberation experience liberation is like. For one thing, maybe it's not very helpful. Maybe what's helpful is to show you the map of how to get there. And so the Buddha emphasized in his teachings, almost entirely those teachings That way of life, those practices that can that can soften, thought, the heart and the mind. Help us to see how the process is their own mind activity, their own mind actually function. And then give us the ability to show us the insight pointers to the insight. They can help us to dislodge the clinging to grasping. That then sets the mind free. And once that's happened, you don't need to know what that's like. Because you know, you need to be told about it. Or say this way you don't need to know because you are. It's a better way of saying it. You don't need to know because you aren't you aren't. So Somewhere halfway through this talk, I realized that I set myself up for problems by saying I was going to in 45 minutes to talk about the core teachings of Buddhism. I try to do that 45 minutes. But so be it. And I think next week, it's the core instacart practices. And then I forgot to sequence I set up the two core practices, record attitudes, and the core realizations for topics for this month. So I hope this works as a kind of introduction to Buddhism. Thank you.