

2008-04-20 Buddhist Practice And The Natural World

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SPEAKERS

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As I was leaving home this morning, my wife last week my wife said to me was, Oh, don't be surprised that there's very few people at IMC today. Because many people are celebrating Earth Day. today. I use Thursdays on the 27th of April but this is the closest Sunday. And the it's nice that we're celebrating Earth Day. And it's very meaningful to me the photograph we have of the Earth from the moon in space, this wonderful jewel, beautiful jewel blue jewel kind of hang there in space. This vast, vast emptiness. And how is it that we have this little jewel? Just like a miracle, right? But there's this little little dot far enough away, it's not even a senior to her that so beautiful. Historically Buddhism has often use the moon as a very important symbol. And in a way back in ancient India didn't even know the world was around basically was flat and the but the moon, they could see the sky and the full moon in particular represented the awakened mind and liberated mind the purified mind, that full bright, full brightness and the full moon is like the full brightness of liberated mind. And they're beautiful down through the history of Buddhism is beautiful poems, poetry imagery used, that includes the full moon and when you get to Japan, where they brought together the images of the moon In the Buddhist teachings on impermanence is a very deep appreciation of how fleeting so much of life is and how quickly things change, which is a very important insight in Buddhism. It's part of deliberate, one of the liberating insights in Buddhism is the fleeting nature of our lives life experience. And so they brought the image of the moon Full Moon together with this fleet to the idea of fleeting is in with that of the image of something that's very temporary, is the morning do and you wake up in the do is there but pretty quickly the sun dries it up and it goes away. It's very temporary. And so the image was used in Japanese poetry was that the moon in the dewdrop the idea that even something as ephemeral as a dewdrop you can see right there also you could see, awakening could find awakening. Somehow there's a deep respect deeper appreciation not only for the awakened mind, but how the awakened mind is found in the smallest little kind of seemingly insignificant aspects of nature, found in nature. And similar kinds of teachings are bound in Buddhism, with people say that we hear the Buddhist teachings in the wind and the rustling leaves and gurgles of the creeks and the Brooks. That's where we find the Buddhist teachings. So they do have the moon in the dewdrop. And, but now we have this image of the Earth from space. If we step back and see just like we can see the moon, in the sky from the moon, you can see the earth in the sky and in space, and, and there's a whole other side to Buddhism that are very different from the idea of the moon, the dewdrop that I think is nicely expressed in the expression, the earth in a teardrop The Earth in a teardrop and teardrops pretty ephemeral as well. But, teardrop from our compassion, and seeing the swirls way of seeing this world that not only is it beautiful jewel, but you know there's been rivers of blood and take all the blood that was spilled in the 20th century. And there's rivers and rivers of blood, say something like 100 million people died in wars in 20th century and 2 million people a year. It's quite simple. And, and then we have the environmental problems that

are not new to the climate, but to a much more conscious of it now. And it's quite something to watch it happen. And this kind of breaks the heart, you know, teardrop, earthen a teardrop. So we have the juxtaposition of the moon, in a dewdrop is a wonderful awakening that scene in the world. This beautiful nature, the natural world of ours, and then also a whole other perspective on this world of ours, here than the Earth in a teardrop. So how do we kind of meet these two? How do we bring these two together? If we see the tear, not as a problem Exactly. But as a really an expression of compassion, then the two are meant to be wedded together, the wisdom that sees the moon with the compassion that sees life as it actually is. So where do these two meet and, and in a sense, the idea of the moon is a little bit idealistic, also, something high up in the sky, and it's a little bit idealistic can be that way. Certainly there are Buddhists who succumb to idealism. And if you put if you're too much in the world, many for many people being in the world is a professional, very to be a worldly person. Often is not Very sometimes it's a nice thing someone who's street smart system understands how the world works. But often the worldly person, someone who's also caught up in the world of greed, hate delusion, everything doesn't know anything else. So how do we bring these two together and the third image which is very meaningful for me, you know in a mind often operates on images, we hold symbolic images is that of the Buddha sitting on the ground under a tree and I think so very powerful image. This for me, apart powerful because it represents someone who's found fulfillment found a deep peace inviting peace and happiness in the simplicity of nature, or in the publicity of being where doesn't need to have a lot of money doesn't need to have a big house doesn't need to have the latest car. The latest You know, mp3 player, you know, so many things that people are driven to have and to want, doesn't need to have, you know, beautiful, fulfilling, intimate relationship. You know, so many things that you know, dry people, some of the things are nice in themselves can be nice in themselves. But there can be, you know, two primary problems with the life of pursuing much of what people pursue this worldly life. One is that it's so easy to get caught up in greed and sorrow around this that these things and not a few people suffer a lot because of the driven by desire driven by greed, or being in that drivenness being devastated a variety of ways when things don't turn out the way that they want to turn out. And so their problem is not the things of the world but rather the way we're caught up in them. And the second problem of course, we know is that the tragedy of the commons, this is called in the in college The movement and that is that the tragedy of the commons is that when the commons they collected ancient ancient ancient America in early America they had this Commons in the village Commons that everyone shared. And as long as only you know a few people share the village Commons it feels Commons thrived. But when you have too many people using the same resource, it exhausts it. So we have you know, so we have a part of our Commons is the air we breathe and the first automobile was great no problem for the common for the air we breathe, you know, just the air could handle it. But when you get you know, first hundred cars was Okay, first thousand first 10,000 per million cars fine. But at some points was a tipping point reached. And the tragedy of the commons is a tipping point where the benefit the harms caused, outweighs the benefit or there's you know, reaches a point of harm and Commons can handle it all. And so that you know the problem, this life of consumption that people are caught up in. And so they did the image of a Buddha or someone who's found dirty, peace and fulfillment and happiness without consuming without taking all these things on that people want to have for themselves. And I think it's a very powerful image. And it's a very challenging image because hopefully, you know, it. Challenges are our basic assumptions about what we need what's important for us. And we can grapple with that, you know, question deeper.

It's also as an image and only as someone who can be fulfilled with very little simplicity of being just sitting there and nature three and two or three. There's also someone who can sit there in nature without a locked house, and feel and feel safe. And that's a very powerful image as well. Someone who could sit that way. feeling quite safe, undefended, open, present and what Take, in some ways those

two are related. Because it's been pointed out that the more things that people have, the more they're threatened by thieves, all kinds of things. And so there's more inclination to lock the house. I know people for whom basically live a fairly relatively poor, poor life, happy, very happy life before life. And they're the ones I know who never locked their houses, even when they're sleeping. And I've been writing Palo Alto, can you imagine that? Those of you live in Palo Alto. And the so this wonderful image and I think it's a powerful image. It's an image, you know, in nature. And you find that the Buddha and down through the history of Buddhism, a great emphasis of practicing in nature. In fact, the Buddha said that as long as they're a monastic who delights living in the forest, at the foot of trees, the way of the awakened ones will not decline. And so, you know, we have one victory here on our property, maybe because the big beggars could say we're sitting at the foot of it. But we have a last year we had a monk, so wonderful American monk named John Shandricka, who I think will come by again within the next month. And he has a Muslim in the New Zealand but he has a small five acre plot of land in Boulder Creek in the woods there that has no buildings on it, I think maybe maybe has a platform to sleep on. He comes but once a month, once a year for a month or so. He's lived there in the woods. And it's a lifestyle that still exists for some people. Beautiful lifestyle. I think, not only is it a lifestyle that consumes very little doesn't, you know, a small footprint right? But also it's a lifestyle that shows that demonstrates A level of happiness, well being, peace, contentment, and that requires so little, just needs to be in nature. And I think hopefully all of you have some sense of having been in nature come for a hike backpacking in at the beach. And, and it's so rejuvenating to some duration. And in that wonderful nourishment, feeling really rich feeling really kind of filled feeling so contented, satisfied, so little is needed in that kind of environment. And it's so easy sometimes to not be in touch with nature, and then be caught up in their social messages that somehow are epidemic in our society, about wanting, having getting, defending, being angry, you know, all the stuff about our social life. And so, to have the example of people who live in nature, I think for me is inspiring to think of that feeds me as well just, for example, knowing and in fact, if you become a Buddhist monastics one of the first Instructions you're supposed to get. This is a Buddha said. Those monks, who are new to the monastic life should be encouraged in this way. Come friends, be forest dwellers resort to remote lodgings in the forest and woodlands. Nice. So many of you will be monastics now. And that could be in the woods. And there is a strong forest tradition in Buddhism in Thailand in other countries, and what's really inspires me also, not only is the example but also how some of these forest monks have become the leaders in the environmental movement in Thailand and trying to protect the very forest that they live in. Their whole lifestyle depends on and one of the beautiful examples is many examples, but this one is, people in Thailand have a very deep reverential attitude towards money. mysticism. It's very sacred the monastic life. And so monks have gone and ordained the trees and wrapped Buddhist robes around them. And then the loggers come, you know, they're cut down that tree. So

and in some places, it's kind of sad in Thailand, they support monks and monasteries, which are the only forests left to some areas. You know, that's where they you know, they should come these areas, everything else has been cut down and cotton, farmed or whatever. And somehow the forest monks preserving not only lifestyle but also kind of like a little park someplace. And a part of the reasons why monastics like living in the variety of reasons why they like living in contact with nature. What certainly is the serenity that can be there that peace, it's very nourishing. So many of you know, and here's an angle poem song that goes back almost a time to the Buddha, of a monk who writes, the writer composed, alone and in the woods, with no one else around. life becomes exquisite. Off I go then, to lead the poorest life, the Buddha praised. I will taste the welfare that he knows he who dwells alone and concentrated quickly and alone, intent on my welfare. I will go to the woods that I love to the heart of elephants to the source of the Yogi's joy in the flowery glades of cool woods. I will have room and ample solitude. In when hot sun tired, I will bathe and refreshing pools in the hollows of the hills. I will fasten My mind's armor into the woods and not come out until I've destroyed what poisons my heart. I

will sit on a mountaintop. And while the wind blows, cooled and fragrant across my forehead, I will burst the mists of ignorance. Then on the carpet of flowers in that word in the cool Cliff caves and blessing with the joy of freedom, I will take my ees beautiful phone. And so many one of the reasons why nature is often emphasized as a place to practice is it's uplifting. It's inspiring. It also is a place of tend to be very tranquil and tend to produce tranquility and peace. I think also It teaches us something very powerful about ourselves and our relationship to the world and our relationship to ourselves. To me, it's meaningful that when the Buddha was going to teach his son, his teachings are not self. Not self is a very challenging teaching in Buddhism. And it can seem kind of dry and philosophical. koan there's no true, essential soul, you know, to no self. And then specifically explained, it can seem very dry and philosophical and unrelated to life as many of us live. But when the Buddha was going to teach his own son that teaching, he took him deep into the woods, in a place where there was the equivalent of the California redwoods grows big Redwood groves, the solid trees, beautiful, majestic trees, and in this Grove with these big trees in nature, your understanding of who you are, and your life is very different than if you're kind of in the middle of the busy city. And our sense of kind of being part of something bigger, connected, something beautiful, medieval sacred. And to be told there's not any cell in the midst of this wonderful interconnected world in nature. It has a very different meaning than if you're sitting you know and Mark Street in San Francisco and some says it has health I think It's kind of more inspiring in that kind of setting. One of the, you know, I took I think in a lot of I went to college, graduate school and in college I studied agronomy, the art and science of field crop management. And in, in graduate school, I studied religious studies, the art and science of what and, and so I took a lot of religious studies classes in graduate school, and I took a lot of science and botany, environmental studies in different classes and in undergraduate school. And the most religious classes I took my spiritual classes I took were my botany classes, not my religious studies classes. And, and I remember thinking, the introduction to botany and being told it makes a beautiful diagram on the chalkboard of the cycles of, you know, oxygen cycles and co2 cycles and how it all works. Plants No less. And, and kind of taking it all in, and then walk leaving the classroom at UC Davis

and off into the courtyard with all these beautiful trees. And standing there kind of in awe. Because I stood there for still for a long time looking at the trees. And the sense of that all I was a Where do I end and where the trees begin. And I had the sense that oh, you know, I could do away with an arm, I could do a nod with both eyes I could do away with like pulling your kidneys a lot of things that I think are pretty important about who I am, I could actually survive quite well without, but I can't survive, you know very long at all without the plants out there. And if I depend them more than they depend on my kidney, or my thyroid or my eye or something, you know, where do I Where do I stop? Where's my boundaries of my body who I am. And at that time, I felt this tremendous sense of interconnectedness and stillness in our in that relationship to the natural world. So, you know, so you find in the forest traditions of Buddhism, and emphasis that the forest also teaches us, nature's teacher for us. And it teaches us a variety of things. It teaches us impermanence. It teaches us the interconnectedness of things. It teaches us stillness, it teaches us a little bit about our social construct of who we think we are. It really stands in stark contrast. Like for example, if you're a person who likes to have status, and you go into the woods, you take your status with you, it's kind of hard. You know? Are you somebody who was approved, how wonderful they are by the size of your car, you know, something that doesn't work so well there. So that is for us as a place that teaches us. But we don't want to be we don't want to be idealistic also about the forest while living in the forest, This is a clip of modern contemporary time Forsman, who writes while living in the forest while living in the forest may sound quite idyllic from a romantic standpoint. On a practical front, a number of difficulties exist. The hour long climb up the mountain after the meal is always a hot and sweaty affair. Perhaps the most incessant challenges come from the impressive array of insects and creepy crawlies that have to be reckoned with kicks, biting horseflies, bees, termites, ants, mosquitoes, spiders, snakes, scorpions, rats and centipedes, blood

sucking leeches, I'll be harmless creatures also cause quite a bit quite a mess of blood. It requires a constant effort to keep my few possessions dry in the rain, and keep from the creatures that climb onto my planet and keep free and free from the creatures that climb onto my platform. The nights are cold and damp. When they're awakened in the night, I often get the sense that I am open prey for any large eating any flesh, large flesh eating creature. It is not uncommon in the middle of the night to hear footsteps of animals, or even to hear the breathing some confused animal, such as a bear or a wild boar. Next my platform seemingly trying to determine what did what has bumped into. Invariably these animals smell who I am and leave me alone are more rare occasions monks have come across a deer being attacked by wild dogs, or a panther amongst 15 Tigers while doing walking meditation. Some even have reported running into worldliness versus one recent night a monk walk down the path from his platform to investigate a curious sound of bamboo being munched upon, only to his astonishment, to find a herd of wild elephants. The earth show rumbling, as if there were a small earthquake, as the elephant's fled in surprise. So

most people, when they go out into the wilderness, go out with physical weapons to protect themselves. But when a monk goes out, and there's nothing on, then there's nothing, no weapons, your only weapon is your state of mind. That is your major tool. So that's interesting. Again, how do you engage? How do you live in this world in the wild in nature, in a way that's safe? And how do you take care of so good idea, like, it's such a tremendous challenge, and so, not always inspiring, but also, it creates a lot of inner strength and a lot of inner self understanding to deal with our fear. We have to kind of raise to the race rise so the depression rise to The occasion and cultivate the qualities that make this not kind of run away. Sit there. There's lots of stories of monks sitting there and meditation late at night, and having a some kind of Tiger corral nearby, or the walk around them smelling. So you know, once you get up and run, that's usually doesn't work so well but tigers are near you. And so what's the best strategy? Don't go in the woods. Don't be a monastic lock yourself up, you know, in the city. That's possible. And what does it take what we know and so at least some people have been inspired by that kind of life and have cultivated what it takes to to face those kinds of challenges. So if you only think only think of it as being, you know, idyllic that's that's not very realistic. It's also challenges in that kind of life. That's part of the value that it has. Sometimes I feel a little bit sad that so much of so many people practice in places like spirit rock, that inspire inspiration with spirit rock, which is a retreat center we have in Greene County. It's just really beautiful nature place. And it's designed the whole place is designed so you cannot stay indoors all the time you You're in for you have to go outside. And I love it there no matter what the weather is there. I love it because somehow you're so connected with the elements there. It's windy, rainy, stormy, Sunny, hot, whatever, just you're, you're always going out into the marine Oak Hills, hillsides and being part of it's great. And the other hand, there are mountain lions there. rattlesnakes and ticks and other things that are making occasional challenge but but mostly it's very comfortable there and advantage of practicing in a comfortable place, it's easy to easier to relax, let go settle down and get calm and peaceful and all that. So it's great. The disadvantage is that you're not challenged with discomfort. And, and sometimes Buddhism actually thrives better when there's also challenges for the practice. Now, some people won't go and practice it is too challenging. So we have, you know, this, this video place where we kind of get people settled. But then sooner or later, I think it's good to practice in Buddhism and setting where your mental state your mind is actually challenged, as well. So it's not just comfortable. The situation you're practicing in. So this place the Buddha, the image of the Buddha, and I think, you know, for me, at least when I think of the image, the symbol of the Buddha, the Buddha sitting on the ground under a tree. I also see it as a place that mediates. I don't know heaven and earth, immediate The place of the ideal and mediates the place of the actual ground the earth itself. And, and this mediation between the our inner life, the ecology of our mind, and the outer life, the ecology of nature in the world. What is the interface? What's the meeting place of the human in nature? And, and what's, what's the influence? What's the impact of the two? Recently, I was

in Arizona, and we were out in the desert between Phoenix and Tucson. That is the national park there. And I found out that when the park was started because of that, because of Grand Canyon National Park, they 60 some 60 years ago, the area was forest. It wasn't like really dense forests, like we're familiar with here, but it was forested, kind of desert area. And now there was very, very few trees left very open. And the reason for that there I was told was Phoenix nearby. And it used to be that the groundwater was only a few feet below the surface of the ground. And as Phoenix is a thirsty city

that got into the groundwater to get the water, and so the groundwater is dropped and dropped and dropped into Finally, there's no groundwater at all. And now Phoenix in order to get more water for growing city, it has to go down some, you know, thousand 2000 3000 feet from Phoenix now that know how far it is. Anyway, so really far, that's it real into unreal to find more of these aquifers down there. So as the groundwater went away, there's the groundwork there to support the vegetation. And so not only is it a lot less vegetation there, but also, it's gotten hotter. That used to be a lot cooler, back back when it was more more water in the ground, and more more vegetation. And that that kind of impact that humans have I nature is repeated, you know, a million times 100 full times all over the world, not just in life. I'm not a modern phenomena. I grew up partly when I was young, in the Adriatic coast in a small city called reister right next to the Yugoslavian coast, and we would go down, you know, sometimes dark down and weekend or something down the Adriatic coast and you Slavia that can be Slavia days. And Ireland's there. And it was the forest a few thousand years ago, in order to grow olives for the Romans. And, and now what's left is rock. You know, all the soil was washed away. And so there's no, you know, there's before, once the soil was gone, it could take, it'll take maybe, I don't know, a few 10s of thousands of years to build it up again. And so it's beautiful, it's quite beautiful. But it's also you know, we realized that used to be forested. And this kind of example of, you know, you know, humans impacting the environment has gone on for thousands of years in big, big, big ways. The difference now That how, you know how, you know, it's not a global global scale, it's a whole different thing. And then go back and realizing the global impact humans have, we can go back to the interesting myths of that Buddhism has supposedly taught by the Buddha, the myths of the of Genesis, the origin of life, as we have it now. And these myths describe the relationship between human greed and the state of our world, the nature of the world. And these myths say there's a very intimate or close relationship between human greed and the state of the world. It used to be that the world was a really idyllic, peaceful, wonderful place. And then people started getting greedy. And as they got greedy, things got harder in the world became more difficult place. Step by step by step that more and more didn't And, and, you know, it's kind of, you know, submit, but it's a myth of the impact of greed and how it affects now the whole environment, the world as we know it. And it used to be so easy and also the myth that it used to be that it was really easy to get food. Just like you can go out and take food from, you know, just pick it from the local trees and plants just they are available to have. But as people got greedy and started hoarding the food, because they want to go out every day and go searching for it and hoarding it, well then the plants didn't just appear easily that they get food into the house, they didn't have to start planting the fruit. And then we started planting the food. Then they started making claiming land for themselves, private property. And as private property has started to happen, then lifestyles lifetime started to decrease and then you know, as They start making private property, then nature sort of change in relationship to that. And I'm not discovering very well, but there's just in the myth, there's an intimate connection between human greed and the nature we have now 300 to 200 years ago, 20 years ago maybe just seems kind of idealistic or the kind of kind of fantasy and fantasy like these kinds of myths. But now we see, you know, it's obvious that human consumption human greed has a huge impact at a global level, this world we live in, and, and they say they're right here in the Bay Area right. Now, they have to start planning for the sea level going up, because much of the bay is socially you know, so shallow, you know. So now they have to, you know, pretty soon we have this beautiful player Island nearby. And so when you look hiking on Blair Island, it's kind of nice out there. 20 years, 50

years, probably owned underwater. So the impact of the mind on nature is uncontestable. So Buddhist practice then has a lot to do with the human mind.

And as we care for human mind, the idea is that, then indirectly or directly, we also take care of our planet Earth. If we don't somehow come to terms or look honestly, at the forces of consumption of greed of hate, of our disconnect with nature and the impact our lives have on nature, then, you know, I don't think there's a much hope for this planet of ours. And it's so easy to put on blinders. It's so easy to live, you know, very simply be caught up in the details of our life, the suffering the challenges of our life. And assume that this is the life we have the lifestyle we have is be taken for granted. We deserve it. I once was many years ago with to try out a new car. And do car. And the car I think was the Honda place here for a little Honda Civic or something. And I was driving around and I wasn't interested in getting an air conditioner, like too much driving around and the guy who was salesman was driving with me. And he's turned to me and said, well, you deserve the air conditioner. And I didn't get the logic of that. What's, what's the logic of that? I deserve it. What did I do?

And, like we have that kind of logic in our society who deserve, you know, just kind of right to certain kinds of things, kind of kind of built into as much of human Western or American psyche as it seems to me. And so do we question that. And I think that the only way to question if that is realistic for us, is if we have a sense of something better And so rather than thinking that we're it's a moral, puritanical obligation to simplify, simplify our life and stop destroying the planet, which almost think we do. Rather, you know, that Buddhism offers rather than obligation it offers us certainly a sense of connection, understanding of the impact understanding of the relationship. But it offers us an alternative that is meant to be really satisfying, really fulfilling. And the example of the Buddha sitting under the tree, in this peaceful, happy kind of state is not meant to be an experience of deprivation. It's not meant to be renouncing all the pleasure and joy and delight of life and live impoverished life. It's meant to be a life where you discover a much richer form of happiness, much richer form of joy and delight and peace that you can ever get from watching Dexter on television without Have you ever watched but when a friend of mine is describing to me the premise of his television show, I was kind of confused. You know, and why would I want to sit there and watch that when I can when I can meditate? And so I don't know how we convey to people, myself as a teacher or to you know, our center or center as maybe a model of Buddhist practice. The house fulfilling and happy producing it is to have nothing. You know, maybe you know, when IMC has enough surplus money, I'll talk to Clint even about this treasure. We have enough surplus money and maybe what do you think by having a big bulletin board we buy buy in Bolton board space, billboard space and 101. And it says something like you can be happy with nothing. Don't buy

Those kinds of advertisements don't generate a lot of money. But how to how to convey that in a visceral, meaningful way, you know, that if you can really be happy? And what are the challenges we have, in our own minds, when we have all these messages and ideas, of what we need in order to be safe, what we need in order to be happy, that maybe really go counter to the very, very kind of nature, the ecology of the heart, where the heart knows how to be happy in some very deep, deep way, without consuming without getting without protecting. Just being this natural being is one of the most beautiful things that my Zen teacher told me was, he turned to me once I was describing what was going on with my life and I was driving it. He was Drag Me Back to drag me across millwrights with a driving his little foot roll. Here's a little Volkswagen bug back then. They took care of himself. And I was a nuisance student. Yeah, he asked me about myself. I was telling Louis doing with my life that time that time and I finished telling of my life. He turned to me rickroll going across the golden Bay Bridge, turns me frightened. He turned to me. He said, Gil, said, just to be alive is enough. That really got me. And many, many years later, 2030 years later, I found out that his teacher had turned to him and said that to him.

There's a wonderful lineage. Just to be alive is enough. And to be alive, is also to feel this interconnectedness. Where lives is the meaning of the full moon, and the earth. And if we sit here like meeting and we have, we have nothing to lose, but to offer our support for to help save this planet of ours. I think hopefully it's an expression of the full moon, expression of our awakened nature. expression of being completely at peace and happy and content here in this heart, that it's really natural for that to be and to be acted on. And trying to make a difference to make this place that we all live in share a place that's beautiful, and safe and healthy, supportive of all of us. So we can have like this mutual supportive event. may that be the case. The Earth Day reminds us of that. Thank you so much.