

2008-05-19 Recollecting The Buddha

Sun, 8/2 7:47AM • 33:04

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

buddha, people, mind, life, self reflective, suffering, possibility, meant, discover, world, peace, self reflection, awake, qualities, extinguished, pivotal point, suspensions, role, peaceful, existential dilemma

SPEAKERS

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Well today is a very special day for Theravada Buddhist. We're a Theravada Buddhist center here. And it's a full moon night tonight. And this full moon day in May is called the V sock, West sock. And today we're terrified in countries that celebrate the Buddhist birth, the Buddha's enlightenment awakening and the Buddha's death. And so you can imagine what that they're all all those important dates kind of celebrate in the same day. It's probably the most sacred day in the tradition. And it's quite common for people to come in those countries, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Burma, for laypeople to go to a monastery that time and the monks will gather as well and one of one of the primary activities for the day is to recollect the Buddha and to cultivate or Tap into an appreciation for the Buddha. And the act of cultivating, thinking about knuckle contemplating the Buddha. appreciating the Buddha is an active way is considered to be one of the important practices in Theravada Buddhism, recollecting the Buddha, and it's supposed to, it's supposed to help elevate the mind. It's supposed to help concentrate the mind and direct the mind to the possibility of its own awakening at some point, and I think the act of appreciation of something that's beautiful is very important. Because it's, I believe in some to some degree, maybe small degree, what we appreciate we become, or we kind of take on those qualities or they those qualities in us get strengthened or get mirrored or get reinforced or something like that. And so the act of appreciation is actually quite important. If we appreciate Violence, then that part of us gets fed or it gets developed. If we appreciate peace, that part of us become stronger. So one of the things that is done in the recollection of the Buddha is recollecting or appreciating the qualities of the Buddha, as they've kind of been recorded to come down to us. And as I thought about this today, and how is a special day to recollect the Buddha, the contrast between the idea the image, the archetype of the Buddha, and what I read about in the paper today stood out quite starkly, and there's all kinds of things in the paper. But the thing that jumped out at me was the aquatic San Francisco Chronicle, the front page, article about violence in grade schools in the Bay Area, and how or in California and how the amount of suspensions students have had For some kind of acts of violence in, in, I guess, K to 12th grade in California has increased over the last year. And that some of the mount the amount of suspensions in the Bay Area, and some of the schools is really astounding. The highest school in the Bay Area School, San Francisco, where there were 40 suspensions for every hundred students in the school. Now, some of those might be been repeated suspensions, but still 40. And that was the highest and then there were some 35 and 24%. And, you know, it goes on and on. And, and, you know, to, you know, the tremendous challenge of go home and go to school, and then school to be environment where you have to be afraid, is, you know, I think there's certainly a challenge to education, but it also is a challenge to grow up in a healthy way in that kind of environment. Richard Shankman, who is one of the people who teaches mindfulness in schools teaches mindfulness in the Oakland school system. And in Oakland, there's a fair number of kids who come also from environments which are quite violent. And, and they come to school, some were traumatized from that. And somewhat they come traumatized. And what they're finding there is that the mindfulness teaching kids just just 1015 minutes

of mindfulness in the classroom, little meditation things, has a huge effect on some of these kids, because it's the only time in their environment where they have where it's safe for them to close the eyes and feel and feel comfortable or safe. And all this stuff, right if stuff gets released or opens up, and, you know, but just to have that peace. There was one child who wrote a wonderful it was through this meditation, and it was the only time he felt peace. Besides going to the going to the gravesite of his grandmother.

It's quite quite something that's the only place for peace in his life. So the contrast of the Buddha and violence in our society. And there's lots of other examples. That contrast to the Buddha also, with what goes on in Burma, not only with the Burmese government's response to it, but the fact that there was 10s and 10s of thousands of people who were suffering this natural calamity of a cyclone that came through and destroyed much of their, their life their lives, like in China as well with the earthquake there. So for me that contrast is that stems quite strong. And the Buddha is meant to be incense a contrast because the Buddha represents a possibility of a way to respond to this challenge the greatest challenges of our lives. It's not meant to be stress reduction, but rather the greatest existential dilemma struggles that human beings face and he represents someone Who face those? And then we see what it looks like, you know, at least in the archetype of the statue. He doesn't come across as someone who is a fighter, you know, he's not kind of pushing and asserting himself on us. He's not someone who's defensive, you know, cowering, retreating. It's not someone who kind of comes through with hate that comes through with great distress or great doubt or great greed, but rather, a very different kind of image comes across here of someone who is grounded, stable, at peace, centered, confident, and present with some very full way. But you probably don't know is it generally the statues are made with his eyes half open. So he's actually aware and connected to the world. He's not withdrawn and he's also has this peaceful smile. That represents a centerpiece. We have in the library a statue of the classic image of the Buddha As he was dying, and he's lying down in a peaceful meditative way, and again, it shows this kind of first new self composed, present confident, and who faces one of the greatest challenges that many people will face? consciously some people don't do it consciously, I guess. facing their own death, he does unconsciously with peace and grace. So we don't know a lot about who the Buddha was. It's hard to pull the keys apart the myths that was created from what you know, actually happen. But what's interesting, I think, is the myth of the Buddha. Naismith, mythic stories of him stories that they've all been him, have been very powerful motivators for millions of people, whether they're actually literally true or not. They work as kind of great, profound myths in people's lives. The main many people see themselves in the stories or the elements of the story. Not literally, but Many of the milestones or many of the transition points in the Buddha's life, can be somehow be kind of somewhat easily be interpreted to kind of be your own story as well, in your own possibility. When I think about the Buddha who lived so long ago, they say, we're not so sure about even the dates Exactly. But I believe in the terabyte in the world, we're celebrating 2500 and 52nd year from the time that he died. So what is someone so long ago in ancient times, have to say that's helpful for us in our modern times? And isn't it archaic and primitive and variety of things? And what strikes me when I read the teachings of the Buddha is how modern they seem, and how relevant many of them seem to be still to this modern modern world. And I think it's not it's not a coincidence, because I think that there was, perhaps a great pivotal point for many, much of humans. localization around different places in the planet around four or five 600 BC, where there was a kind of there was enough kind of development of culture of civilization, variety of things, that there was a profound change and people's ability to self reflect.

And certainly we can use our imagination to realize that did you know if we take evolution as the as the linear development, that there was a time when living beings or ancestors didn't have self reflective abilities? And then at some point, the ability to realize, Oh, I'm here, not only that, I'm here. I'm different

than someone else and I'm different only that but there's a future there's tomorrow and there's yesterday and in fact that you know, I'm not going to be here forever. And, and what are my own compat capacities? What can I develop what's happening to me What's the causes and conditions for my happiness or the cause and conditions for my, my suffering for the situation in my life, that's it takes self reflection. And, you know, I think lower forms of life don't have the same level of self reflection as we do now. So where that tipping point come where that common self reflection became a key ingredient for human beings. Last summer, I took my four year old son to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC. And there was a a artistic, three dimensional rendering sculpture. There was I don't know how big 2020 by 20 or something of reconstruction of a Neanderthal grave site. And this Nan Darrel figure fellow had died and they put him up, wrapped him up somehow and put them in this little hole in the ground they dug and they are the people who were around to do something. Putting sprinkling flowers in or leaves in or I don't remember anymore, there was clearly a kind of ritual marking of this person's death and in my four year old was completely fascinated and disturbed, because he'd never It was a statue but he'd never confronted death. As you know, that's what happens when you die and it was quite something. So, here in the study of self reflection, what happens to you what happens to the people around you takes reflection. So, in the, in the hundreds of years before the Buddha in India, there was intense self reflection among some people, where they were trying to make someone have some interest come to some understanding about the human condition. And not because they were just kind of abstract philosophers, because the human condition was something that they had to contend with and deal with. They saw around them and these items that in the cells sickness, old age and death, the struggles, they saw the possibilities of somehow trying to try to figure out how do you make a difference in this world. How do you make a difference for yourself and your community around you, so that you can become happier or safer or have a better future? for yourself? How can you prevent some of the tremendous calamities that can befall people? And what is the cause and effect phenomena that comes into play, that makes a difference for our well being and our welfare. So there was intense kind of exploration of this. And some of the solutions people came to was, you know, had to do with the gods. You know, if you, if you pray and make offerings to the gods, the gods will make sure that you're happy. And if you don't please the gods, then you're going to be in trouble. And that was kind of a solution to try to make sense of this expense. Why does things happen to people? Why did bad things happen when good things happen? What role do we have in this kind of play of our life? And, and so there was an intense speculation exploration in India. For the Buddha for this, and people came up with a lot of different theories and ideas, to try to make some sense of this life. Again, this very intense use of our ability to be self reflective, to think about ourselves and think about this life of ours. So the Buddha, in a sense, inherited many hundreds of years, this intense self reflection, and he could process it, he took it in, but you know, as it was there and his environment and, and so he set out on his spiritual quest, with the support of all that. And he also was part of this self reflective movement. Some of the mythic qualities of the Buddha as he set out for his quest was that to borrow from another myth, he lived kind of a life of Eden. As a young man, Charles young man, this is that his life was depicted as he lived in three different wonderful places. He was protected from the distress and difficulties of life. There's wild palaces. And he was protected from sickness, sick people, people, that people who didn't see those, and kind of isolated from the difficulties of life and just all these pleasurable things are brought to them musicians and food and opportunities and education, all these things.

And the innocence of that innocence of being protected in a way that some some of us try to do a little bit to some degree with our children as well. At some point, there's a kind of going beyond your own house going beyond your own neighborhood going beyond whatever the innocence that in some sooner or later, sometimes just much sooner, too soon, perhaps in some communities, and sometimes it's later that we look beyond and realize, wait a minute. It's not just an Eden here. It's not just a wonderful world for the people have a wonderful world. It's their challenges here. They're difficult so the

Buddha came to this pivotal point where he was kind of disillusioned, or he woke up from some kind of state of innocence or not knowing. And it deeply troubled him. And when in deeply being troubled by it, he really wanted to find a way find a solution to this existential dilemma or this dilemma, this issue of how do people get happy? How do people suffer white, but what's our role? What's our responsibility? What do we do with all this? Remember, this is a time before people had the kind of psychological understanding that modern people have nowadays. So the understanding of our how our own psychology comes into play, you know, wasn't wasn't there in the way that was now. So it was all expressions, all kind of discovering things, new pioneers in a way. So with his tremendous drive, to deal with this to work with us, he couldn't go off on retreat. He couldn't go off to university and do the studies that we can do now. There was the things weren't exist didn't exist back in those times. And in that set, derive He left his family and went off and became a renunciant. To have this to to explore this to deal with it. And it said that he studied some of the great teachers of his time and became disillusioned that they didn't have a solution to what he was looking for. And then he had a remarkable memory. And this was a pivotal memory for this process he went was going through. And then as he remembered a time when he was six years old, when he was left alone, at the edge of a field that was being plowed, and beautiful spring day underneath the rose apple tree. And he set up right and in that peaceful place where nothing was asked of him then when was asked asked me to do anything or perform anything or expecting anything of him. He was kind of like forgotten their role. Everybody's on the field plowing the ceremonial plowing of the first plug of the spring. He fell into a state of well being peaceful well being joy, happiness. And when he was 36, he remembered that experience when you were six and experienced it he forgotten. And I do know there's some some people who have experiences of well being as a child that are forgotten, lost touch with as they get older. And some people when they meditate, that's when they remember, you know, like they reclaiming or rediscovering a possibility. So he remembered something that happened to me six years old. And in this intense exploration self, you know, self reflective exploration that has exhausted all the possibilities you knew of at the time. You thought, Wait a minute, maybe that sense of well being Rajoy that I had as a child, that's a new route, that's a new position or new perspective from which to do this exploration. So he gave up his ascetic practices. He gave up many of the practice he done focus on bringing about this state of concentration that he has a six year old, that brought the state of joy and happiness. And with that, he developed further states of concentration further states of well being. And what he discovered was that in order to use or self reflective ability to see deeply and clearly enough, you have to have a mind which was not agitated, there was not tormented, not not suffering, that you best have a mind that was filled with well being there was stable, happy, contented. That's an ideal condition from which to see deeply and clearly into this life of ours. So then he sat there, cultivating this deeper states. And then in fact, what happened was, he did see very deeply and he said he saw so deeply that it transformed him from They say Buddhism an ordinary person to an awakened person. And so the question is, what was it It happened? because it provided the solution to the quest that he was after. So what was it he saw? That allowed that change, or what he saw in it kind of is usually presented in very mythic words.

But what he saw was he saw that our happiness, or well being, at a fundamental level, is not caused by Gods is not caused by genetics is not caused by karma, not caused by what happened in the past, is caused by is not caused by others. But it really is caused by the ethical quality of our motivations. Is is caused by the quality of the choices we make. Deep in our own mind. So rather than looking at, rather than thinking that our suffering is fixed, one of the theories of ancient times is India, was it, everyone's allotted a certain amount of suffering, the beginning of time, and the endless amount of rebirth, you'd have to go through it all until it's exhausted. And that's the way it is. The Buddha said, well, that's not it, because actually we have a role to play in the creation of the suffering and the arising the suffering. And, and so what he saw was the role of our own mind. And this was an end to move the to take the self reflective capacity, and go far enough back into the mind or thoroughly enough in the mind to see

where the responsibility lies, where the possibility is, where we can really make a difference, which is great contribution. And it wasn't meant to be insult to us. You know that oh, you know, you're responsible for your suffering. You know, what do you mean? Terrible things happened to me. The world did the terrible things to me. But what it meant was that if you really want to discover the possibility of this inner stability, peace, compassion, love, confidence, strength that the Buddha represents. You have to find that in yourself. And then once you find it, you go out there to meet the world. With that, the image of the Buddha even though he remained a renunciant, not engaged in household life, he never job not to mention at all that he was someone who spent 45 years after his awakening, engaged in the world. Teaching, walking around meeting people from all status of life, engaging them, helping them supporting them, meeting people who had horrible horrific things happen to them and in counseling and helping them point To the possibility in themselves, in them, any met people who were the highest, the highest kind of stations of life and, you know, conventionally had a wonderful life, and, you know, and tried to support and help them as well. And so what makes the Buddha's teaching so modern is that I don't think you get more modern than taking the ability to be self reflective, taking evolution of humans to note, taking self reflective ability, take them to the level, where you, you discover the tools, the practices and tools in the mind, to perfect enough to strengthen enough this self reflective ability to look deeply enough in one's own mind. To see what it is we do, how we react, how we grab, how we get attached. we cling, how we get afraid, how we hate all these different things that come into play. causes the mind to become afraid, hateful, angry, distressed, despondent, depressed, you know a whole whole series of different things that you know we call suffering. And it's not an easy task. But the Buddha saw it saw saw this place, and more remarkably, he saw it, he saw the possibility of that place that's the pivotal point the mind, you saw the possibility of releasing something, letting go of something and becoming free, becoming awake. And the word Buddha comes from the Indian word, Bodhi, which means to be awake. And, and I love this word awake. Because I think conventionally many of us have a sense of what it means like to be To conventionally be weak, especially maybe after a really restful night of sleep or really restful nap or something, we really feel awake. There's a clarity and a sharpness, alertness just since a barely being awake generally comes with a sense of well being, there's something peaceful in that place. But the most significant thing about being awake

is that when you really feel awake, you know you feel awake. Again, the self reflective thing, you know, you're awake. And that ability to know you're awake creates a a freedom and independence in the mind, where some aspect of the mind and knowing quality of the mind has become independent of what it knows to become awake and take this kind of what I would call ignited self reflective ability. And setting us free from being entangled with all the things that we can be concerned about in our life, it doesn't mean becoming aloof from life. It means that our awareness is not in meshed or lost or obsessed with the conditions of the world. So, to take the self affectability and perfected and develop it, so the knowing quality of the mind becomes a power and the strength becomes stronger than the forces in their mind of attachment and clinging or fear. And taking requests, seeing how we can make a difference in our mind to move the mind that direction. And then they set the mind free. In this awake state, the Buddha represents is what the Buddha was, was teaching where you discover there perhaps can a people who have kind of been pointing this direction ever since. Certainly Buddhist down through the ages, and perhaps in modern psychology is getting greater, more and more about how the mind works. There's also a greater greater appreciation of the role of the mind and the role of our own motivations, our own intentions, their ethical qualities of the mind, and how they affect all these things. But the remarkable thing about the Buddha was, at least as recorded in history, he was the first and you know, sometimes the first is the most difficult. And, you know, it's a huge hurdle to overcome. And so we celebrate we respect we appreciate we you know, this person, you know, who was a pioneer, who did this amazing feat that kind of opened the door opened the door for us so we can go through that as well

and do this. It's not meant for those who are state hearted the Buddha You know, was came from a warrior class in ancient India. And he's usually understood to be someone of tremendous courage that he's been discouraged do what he did, to face what he had to face, to deal with his own mind this deep way. It takes a certain amount of courage and wisdom or commitment to be someone who really loses interest or turns away in a healthy way. turns away from being enamored in the things that people get enamored with, that causes them to lose their self reflective freedom. People get enamored, lost and chanted in power and money and sex and music and you know, all kinds of stuff. War. It takes courage. And so I like to me when I reflect on the Buddha, I think of someone who's created Just think of someone who was willing to use that courage to sit down, not as not passively, even though it looks passively sit this way, but in a way that was tremendously active, powerful dynamic, in that dynamic dynamism, discovered a piece of stillness. That's kind of like the stillness of a flame, a candle flame, which is unwavering, though with agitating it, it's very dynamic, that flame was completely still. And sometimes if your look and this is probably physically in physics is not accurate, but sometimes when I look at a candle flame, because I see it, I see the gap between the wick and the flame. The flame is free. Not exactly free, but the what they say in Buddhism is that Nirvana is what the Buddha discovered, is like a candle flame that's been extinguished which really free But it sounds like some kind of kneel ism to think of you know, the mind has been extinguished or something, but the in the ancient physics of India, a flame flame is never extinguished. When a flame goes out, the heat doesn't disappear, the flame doesn't disappear, the heat element is freed from

the candle and isn't free and goes out everywhere in a way that cannot be defined or described. And so rather than being some kind nihilistic idea, sexually it's meant to be a very freeing idea, the candle going out means it's it goes it's, it's traveling out, it's been set free, and nothing has been extinguished. And so the mind of a Buddha is a mind that's been set free. And it said, that a mind of the Buddha cannot be defined You know, conventionally we say, Oh, this guy's a Buddha, he's a monk or whatever. But you know, who was the Buddha? is an interesting question. It's a profound question. It's a different kind of question. Then you'd say, you know, like, who was Abraham Lincoln? Abraham Lincoln, but most of you know, he's the president. And you must say what he did say, who's the Buddha, who he was, you know, this guy long ago. It's not so important. It's what what his mind is, what happened inside of him, psychologically. That's what we want to know. And it says, we can actually define that in a way that if you see someone walking down the street, you might be able to see if their grumpy mood their grumpiness defines them. Or you see someone's walking down the street and they seem very friendly, as a friendly person. And you can kind of or you see that someone's kind of very quickly, someone's obsessive about certain things. And, and you can have the obsession to find them or whatever the Buddha said, has been said Free, in his mind cannot be defined.

So that's what we celebrate today. So hopefully it's very modern discovery. Modern enough for you. And what I offered you tonight was my reflections, my contemplation. So in the Buddha and I encourage you to have your own, maybe yours will be a little bit different. But I think that it's a wonderful contemplation. And I think the world desperately needs people who discover some of the wisdom, some of the compassion and some of the peace that the Buddha represents. So May this one full night full moon night inspire you to take a second look at your profound capacity for self reflection. Maybe you'll even sit up into the night meditating looking out the window contemplating where the freedom of profundity is in your self reflective mind. Can you discover the self reflective mind that you have that has no definition that cannot be defined cannot be limited.

Thank you very much.