

2009-10-05 Emotions Boredom

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SPEAKERS

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So Good evening, everyone. So the I guess the one announcement I'll make is follow up from last week a little bit. Last week we had our long dear Sangha member rainbow in the hospital dying and we knew she was dying last Monday. And then on Tuesday, she very peacefully died around noon. And she had a very peaceful passing the she was more or less unconscious for the last 24 hours of our life. But then, right near the end, Andrea Fella came there to see her and was chanting rainbow love the discourse and loving kindness, the discourse Metta Sutta, and, and she actually had her will, that were there, whatever, that she wants a champion for. Her memorial service. So Andrea came and was chanting it. And while she was chanting it, Rainbow opened her eyes and looked and heard and then quietly passed away. So that was very unfortunate to lose her and have her go. But it's in that she was kind of her wishes she was ready, given the circumstances that it happened.

So I don't know how to transition from that to the topic of my talk, especially given the topic because I thought I would talk about boredom and, and hopefully make it interesting for you.

The few things that have prompted me to want to give this Talk. One is a six year old at home who his favorite favorite, seemingly favorite thing he likes to say these days? Is I am bored. And now this is I think, shorthand for I don't know what to do. You're supposed to figure it out for me. And you better do it now. So that's rather getting kind of boring now. And he does that a lot. So we're trying to work with that. And then also on recent retreats that I've taught, a number of people have come for interviews and retreats and talked about boredom arising their meditation and their practice, especially on the retreat. And I responded in some ways, some some I usually say about boredom because it does come up from time to time. And I've been reflecting on a little bit since I gave those people advice. On retreat, I only have a couple of minutes, a few minutes to say something helpful. But as I've been thinking about it, Rainbow boredom is a very big topic. And it's like a whole family of attitudes or approaches or feelings. And there's many things that can bring up the boredom. And probably when I've given relatively brief advice to people about boredom on retreat, I've been sometimes maybe too brief, maybe miss them because it's can be so wide ranging the kind of issues that come up around boredom. So I thought I would take the opportunity for today to give a talk on boredom. And then we can add it to the series of talks I've been doing in the course of the spring and summer on emotions. So we have one more emotion for one more emotion for that series. Are you ready for boredom?

So boredom, I think of as, or how it's often seen as lack of interest, pervasive lack of interest. That comes along sometimes with lethargy, with the kind of pervasive kind of feeling of kind of, sometimes with anxiety or angst. Sometimes it's very sometimes with aversion to the state to what's going on. The aversion part can be very, very subtle. And sometimes Buddhist teachers will say that boredom is a

form of aversion. There's some kind of resistance or pushing away or, or dislike about something that's going on. And, but certainly a lack of interest, as well as a very difficult time to pay attention. It's very hard to engage. When there's boredom there. There's a wonderful kind of wonderful But a reciprocal relationship between our capacity to pay attention and becoming bored, and boredom and our capacity to pay attention. So the more bored we are, the harder it is to pay attention, the harder it is to pay attention these users to get bored, bored. So people have attention deficit disorder disorder, for example, have a much easier time to get bored. Because they have a hard time mustering their attention, to pay attention to be engaging involved in what they're doing. It's been I've seen boredom is can be a great problem for people. Excuse me while I try to clear my throat and apologize. So boredom can be a problem because people will sometimes engage in all kinds of unskillful behavior when they're bored, bored having bored kids at home is a recipe for problems. I have two kids at home. And so when one of them is bored, one of the problems that takes is the board will egg on the other one in order to get things on boring in the house, and then they're screaming and yelling and coming to us upset, you know, he did. And, and they seemed like they kind of in the boredom, they kind of looking for trouble looking for something to engage, you know, unskillful things.

It said that when people are bored, they're much more likely to do addictive behaviors for different kinds, smoking, anything, all kinds of stuff, drug drug problems. It's been pointed, pointed out that in studies that one of the one of the primary unnecessarily causes one of the primary conditions for drug use among teenagers is boredom. And when they're bored, they're more likely to use their They're not bored and they're less likely to use. And so in other kind of behaviors can be problematic. In meditation, one of the problems with boredom is someone might give up their meditation practice. Other things become more interesting. You sitting meditating and you're bored and, and just occurs to you that the freezer needs to be defrosted. And that is infinitely more interesting than sitting there meditating. And so if you go or use the bed minute, forget it. This is boring. I don't know what these Buddhists are talking about following your breath. The breath is the most boring thing in the whole world. And I don't know what they don't know what they're talking about when they say it's interesting. And it's I looked that I looked, I looked and I paid attention. I just couldn't find anything interested in my breath whatsoever. And, and I'm bored and off I go. It can be very discouraging, so people can lose their faith in the practice in theirs. Spirituality because somehow they can't just find their way in. It's just boring and doesn't seem interesting I think grabs them, nothing, engage them engages them. Sometimes the boredom of meditation might continue meditating. But it's kind of like opening up the space in the mind to try to look for something else in the mind to do so fantasy can take over. And we get interest in the fantasy and, and reinforcing tendencies to think about to obsess about things that maybe we shouldn't be obsessing about.

Some people seem more prone to boredom than others. And I read a study once where they said that I don't know if this is true, but the study claimed that extroverts are much easier bored than introverts. Maybe introverts have more an inner life that keeps them interested in things. And extroverts. I suppose the theory is that they need more external stimulus in order to stay engaged and interested. And I've seen in myself occasional tendency that if I have a lot, if I do a lot of things really busy doing a lot of things, a lot of stimulus coming in, and all the stimulus stops, they're just momentum inside to what to do more, to want to do more. And, and even if I don't need to do anything, just like this automatic pilot, and I think that in our oversight, there's kind of a tendency to be overstimulated in our society. You go so many places, public places, and they have televisions that are on and people have their iPods in today or learn that they have waterproof iPods. And the person said that guess he went to the pool and people had the iPod strapped to their arm and I guess they plug their you know, their phone in their ear and swimming laps. So that's quite something. I thought because You know, you want to be you want to be efficient. And so you won't be able to do two things at once at least I mean, that's old fashioned two

things at once. And because you know, so you so the idea is to people always whatever reason, people often want to be stimulated, it becomes self reinforcing. Because if you don't keep yourself stimulated and engaged, then it can be uncomfortable. And so then you that discomfort, or boredom prompts you to be lookout for more stimulus. The more stimulus you have, the more alienated person becomes with themselves, less in touch with them themselves who they are. And then they have less skills and less capacity to know themselves and be with themselves in a quiet way. And so there's wonderful skills and capacity to sit quietly enjoy oneself, but nothing going on, becomes a foreign idea. Something always has to be always there and entertaining us or doing it for us. Keeping us going. musics always going in the background to keep us kind of jazzed up Perhaps some people are like that. Television is always on. I've heard people haven't seen it. But I've heard of people where they have television in most of the rooms in the house. Certainly they can, you know, the kitchen living room and bedrooms and, and then all of them are on. And so when you go around, you know, you get you're not going to miss anything.

Now, sometimes the drive to always stay stimulated, is there because people would like to avoid being present for themselves being present for what's going on in the environment or in themselves is way of distracting themselves from themselves. And, and so it's kind of running away. And so when all the stimulus stops, they haven't learned how to be with what's going on inside. And I've also read that one of the conditions for boredom is a lack of self awareness, lack of ability to recognize one's own emotions and feelings. When there's a poor capacity to recognize oneself, that's there's not there's a higher chances for boredom doesn't mean that that's the only necessary cause for boredom. It's one of the conditions that can happen.

So there's different kinds of boredom. There's the kind of boredom that comes when we're asked to do something that we don't want to do. And so there's an aversion to the activity. And sometimes that aversion takes up a form of subtle resistance or subtle kind of shutting down or lethargy that kind of drains us of energy, and just seems so boring and I call this as some of you know, my Sears mind. Because when I was nine or 10 years old My mom would take me to Sears to buy clothes. And, and Sears is right isn't Sears in inherently very boring place? It just, you know, they must design it that way just like built into it, you know, and the way they you know everything about the smell and everything is inherently boring, you know? And as soon as we leave Sears, my mom would say, should we get some ice cream? You know, I wasn't so tired anymore. I wasn't so bored. You know, just boom. It's amazing how quickly it can turn. And because ice cream is inherently interesting, right? I keep using the word inherently because there's no thing and no circumstance no situation, no experience, which is inherently boring. Boredom is an activity of the mind. It's an attitude. It's a resume very subjective. In Buddhism, it's a it's an activity in the mind, the mind has to do something mind has to work in a particular way for us to be bored. And, and so usually I think people when they assess something as being boring, they're blaming something. And what we asked what we do in Buddhism is we actually turn around and look, try to understand what is that activity in us. That is, that is prompting or causing or bringing about that feeling of boredom that we have. And that means taking responsibility for where we're feeling, rather than projecting the blame elsewhere. So this is a very important principle in Buddhism all around this willingness to turn around and get to know what's here. So one cause of boredom is a subtle or maybe not so subtle aversion. And then it's shutting down because we're doing something we don't want to do. Sometimes it has to do because it's very repetitive, dull and uninteresting, and some things are Interesting if you do it often enough and you can you don't have any way of kind of engaging with them more creatively but some things are an interesting because of the relationship we have to it the attitude we have to it the meaning we have about it, that you know that this is not something you want to do in a different situation, it becomes very interesting. A lot has to do with the meaning assigned to it. So I don't know what a good example would be. But

you know, there's like making a meal. You know, I've been bored sometimes making meals for my kids who have very narrow palates. Again, thinking like that again. But then someone else comes over to eat with us and I'll make the same thing but now I'm making it for more people. You know, it's like it has different meaning it has value or something beyond these You know, no, you know, the usual way of doing it. So that's one kind of boredom. So they're kind of subtle resistance, pushing away, not liking what's happening and liking what we asked to do. And other form of resistance is not being able to do what you want to do. So, you want to do something, but you know, it's not available. You can't do it now. I want you know, I want my dad to read stories to me. And my son, my six year old son, he's discovered this little series of books for like a six year old has been called droon. And it's this fantasy story for six year olds, fantasy world. And we are now reading the 33rd book. And he can't get enough of them. And he seems they're always Very interested. And sometimes I've read them and reading them. And I realized for the last page, I don't have a clue what I read. And so I've been very creative to try to find a way stay interested. Because, you know, there's a dialogue written in very formulaic way, you know, and, and now we're up to volume 33. And luckily, he only has 30 for the author. So So, and there are times when I felt like I want to do something else, you know, I don't want to sit here reading this book, you know, it's been nice, you know, for a while here, but this is too much now. And, and, and I have other things I'm more interested in doing. And my frustration of not being able to do what I want to do is part of the reason why I get bored, and the feeling of boredom, kind of this frustration to frustration that translates or transforms into boredom, lack of interest in what's happening, because I'd rather do something else The and then there's a boredom that comes from an inability to pay attention. So as I said earlier, sometimes that comes from having some kind of maybe attention problems, maybe not having trained the mind to pay attention. trainings and mindfulness is now understood to be a very useful way to overcome boredom for a lot of people, to simply be able to learn to pay attention more carefully and sustain the attention what we're doing so the mind doesn't jump around and lose attention and lose its engagement as a way of avoiding overcoming boredom. When I was first introduced to this practice of Vipassana, I was in Thailand, and I did many weeks of intensive training and be passing it monastery. And after about maybe eight weeks or so this intensive training in mindfulness the abbot of the monastery For some reason and asked me or invited me to come with him to Bangkok for a funeral and memorial service for a low ranking Thai general. So it was a rather a semi kind of a no to elaborate. glitzy Disneyland kind of event, you know, all these Thai people there and everything was in Thai and I got bored and you're here been sitting for eight weeks in a little hut you know, not talking to you hadn't been talking to anyone. Nothing's been huts, you know, bare walls, you know, it's like eight by eight or something. And hadn't talked to almost anyone for eight weeks. No entertainment, hadn't read anything. I hadn't done anything except sitting there watching my breath and walking and walking meditation. You know? It's a recipe for boredom, right? And I hadn't been bored at all. But then in this elaborate ceremony and this glitzy kind of hall with all this stuff and paraphernalia and ceremonial that and Muay Thai language I got bored. So it took me a little while they're sitting there being bored. And I think part of that kind of kept me bored and kind of engaged was a certain level of self pity. So combined boredom and self pity, and you're in real trouble. And so it took me a little while. And then finally I said, you know, wait a minute. I've been doing all this intensive mindfulness training.

Why don't I use it?

So I started paying attention, just pure, bringing my attention up to the forefront and noticing what was going on. And very quickly, the boredom just vanished just by engaging mindfully in what was going on in the present moment. So that's fine. That was the situation I can bring my mindfulness up. But there's some situations where the mindfulness can't be mustered up. Somehow it's too jumpy, and you can't get focused, or there's not enough motivation, or there's some resistance to the moment motivation, something standing in the way, and we just can't get engaged. Fear can sometimes create to make the

mind jump around. So it's hard to settle on something. And so, sometimes the fear has to be addressed. Sometimes other emotions, it can be anger, or deep sense of hurt that is right on this close to the surface. And so it needs to be addressed but it's difficult to address revisit reluctant to address it. And that reluctance sometimes translates to attention jumping around and not being able to settle anywhere. That's sometimes a reason. Sometimes people are tired, that can cause a difficulty pay attention to a variety of reasons. So depending on why we're bored, different things, different approaches need to be used to deal with it. Certainly the common approaches pay attention, bring your attention, explore it, but sometimes a deeper analysis and deeper issues need to be addressed.

So for example, sometimes boredom is not boredom about what's happening right here and now. But it might be a deep seated frustration or inability to follow one's one's heart's deepest desires, when most wants to do with their life, what's most meaningful important for one's that one's life is somehow a person not able to follow through on and do so and maybe because they feel stuck in a job or stuck in a relationship or stuck in a certain way of living? And so they really what they want to do is they want to go, you know, anything, but it's too risky to do that, well, then I won't make no guarantee they'll have money or then I won't get my parents approval or that I won't, you know, it'd be you know, shake up my relationship and I can't do that. society would approve of this and a lot of reasons why people hold back from following their, their inner dreams, the dreams they have for themselves or their desires for what they want to do. And sometimes that holding back and living one's dreams or one's desires, has a cost. Something is shut down or pushed down or repressed. And that sense of then subtle, maybe, discouragement, subtle. Lack of inspiration, loss of inspiration, loss of faith. And kind of settled depression can lend itself to being bored with what's left you know, doing his job. Being this relationship of doing this, it's not really what I want to do, I'm kind of stuck and I really want to do something else. And so in that kind of situation, it might require some really deep, deep soul searching and a sense and really questioning of one's priorities and when those ones life, and is it really, it's really a matter of kind of being mindful of a life which shouldn't be lived. And rather, we needed to change some behavior, change how we live and maybe follow a dream we have or follow something. Sometimes we have to look at our values. What are the values that we have, that we think is important? So if what we think is important, is money, then pursuing money might be really interesting. And watching your breath might seem boring, and in fact, sitting watching your breath might interfere with your great capacity. To be a moneymaker, I didn't do one person who had trouble meditating some years ago, because he was obsessed with following his stocks. And, you know, that's was his. Yeah, he's much more interested in that. And meditation was much less boring compared to the excitement of the stock market. No one seems to be following stock market anymore as they were five years ago,

one might have values of, you know, our interests, some of the things we're interested in might not be to our our real benefit or benefit of other people. Some people are really interested in pornography. And I know people have real addiction too. They come and talk to me about their addictions to that and it keeps their interest and one other and you know, and rather than kind of, you know, That's somehow something in them keeps orienting towards the pleasure they get from that. And not doing it sometimes gives it leaves them kind of feeling blank or empty or uninspired or dull or, or, you know, their life, maybe because their life doesn't have any meaning. So sometimes it's not a matter of being mindful. But again, as I said earlier, maybe behavioral change, maybe we have to find a place of meaning in our life, meaning is an important thing to have. And if you don't, if you don't have some kind of meaning, boredom can be the result of that. Another thing to look at is how boredom is an expression of a sense of self self identity or what we think is important for ourselves. Sometimes boredom arises it's very interesting that people can be interested in a person or in a thing or something. If that person or activity Praise is their sense of self. Or if it criticizes their sense of self, you know, for that person is really angry with me and upset with me telling me how terrible I am. That person has my I'm interested. I'm

attentive, I don't like it. But I'm really attentive, or this person is praising me, that's great. I'm awake, thank you. But if the person who situates circumstances, has no effect on our sense of self at all, doesn't pump it up or doesn't pump it down. Guess what, some people get bored. Because people are so oriented around their sense of self and what it's going to do for me, that, that if they're not getting somehow that stimulus up or down, then it has no value. And if it has no value, there's no interest if there's no interest. It can be boredom. And it can be very sad, or very painful to be on the receiving end of that kind of boredom as a person where you're talking to them and they seem to lose interest, I hope my talk on boredom is not causing that for you here. So, one of the, one of the places to study, when we do are mindful of boredom is how does this relate to our sense of self? And, and are we trying to create or defend or protect the self in some way? And if you know and how does boredom arise when our sense of self is not supported, not uplifted or not criticized or threatened in some way. And then here it gets get to something that's much more core to it and many people, their sense of self and to look really look deeply at that. Understand that can be really transformative. One of the great messages of spirituality, many spiritual traditions, especially the ones that have contemplative practice, is that it's possible, not only possible, but it's quite profound and beautiful, to drop the sense of self entirely, to not operate with things circulating and orienting and centered around our self concept, me myself in mind, so much so that the very sense of self the very sense of, of being here as a self begins to soften, dissolve and become softer. And there's a kind of sense of openness or transparency and awareness, transparency and body and feeling kind of porous with the environment around as a sense of self kind of as he is seen. Being imaginary seems, seems seen as being insubstantial as not seen at all. But to kind of reincorporate a sense of self and play the whole selfing game of trying to be concerned about self image and how people see me and who I am really, and, and to protect myself and you know, his whole kind of world of selfing, which is certainly important part of human life. to really go turn look at it very, very deeply and question it.

And to have it go poof, to have kind of disappear is very interesting, especially in relationship to boredom. Because chances are, that if you're not operating out of some self centered concerns, chances are you're not going to get bored. And chances are that some something something about self centeredness, something about being orient around sense of self and what this is going to do for me or how to relate to Me and my desires and my versions and all that as a key thing to do with this activity of the mind called boredom. So we turn around in mindless practice, when we're bored. And we look for them right in the face. And so we're not fooled by it. So we're not pushed around by it. And so we get interested in it. So what is boredom? Feel like? What does it feel like in the body that pervasive feeling, maybe, or lethargy or feeling drained or feeling kind of heavy or dull? What's it like in the mind? What's like, what are the beliefs that are operating when we're bored? What are the thoughts that we're telling ourselves? There might be a particular pattern of thinking, operating over and over again, when we're bored? Might be subtle. So you have to be very subtle and paying attention to it. What are the emotions and feelings that are under the surface of the boredom? There might be a whole a whole big collection of kind of emotions ready to bubble up. If we can just get underneath the surface of the boredom. There's a lot that can go on a lot to explore there. I think that it's a very valuable thing to do. Because almost always, not always, not always, but often enough. Boredom is rather deleterious for us. And we behave unfortunately, kind of unfortunate ways because of it. But also because it's kind of a lost resource. The human heart, the human heart that's free the heart that's able to be present in a vibrant way. The heart that's present in a loving way in a kind way. is a beautiful thing. The heart that's the mind is able to be interested in this life is a beautiful thing. And so not to have that is unfortunate. Not to have that is kind of a you know, a loss of vitality. Almost always Because sometimes boredom is really good. And we don't want to knock boredom down as saying it's just, you know, a bad thing. The my favorite boredom quote about how boredom can be good, is a Zen master named cutter, Gary Roshi who was taught here in this country. And he once said, if it's not boring, it's not Buddhism. Isn't that great? And,

and how I understood that is that if you're enamored in Buddhism, if you're fascinated with Buddhism, this religion out there this great grand, you know, world religion that has so much promise lightened meant and I'm gonna study Buddhism and get a PhD in Buddhism and really kind of get into it and it's gonna be so wonderful and I'll just be great. And we're all these Buddhism badges and medals. And it'll be speedos make life wonderful, I'll be the savior and Buddhism is that Buddhism is a thing. And it's so interesting. So Buddhism is not found in Buddhism Isn't that great? So, it's very important to, if you're enamored and enchanted in but the great promise of Buddhism is going to do for you. It's some point that's fine to be charmed at first to be interested in you have to be is a new person because of how you're going to find out that you're supposed to get disenchanted. But at some point, at some point, you realize the point is not Buddhism is not all the books, normal learning, know all the lists, but rather the point is to turn the attention around Hundred and 80 degrees. And, and study the great discourse of the Buddha that's found in your own heart that this is where Buddhism is it in yourself, not in the books not in Buddhism out there. So at some point you have to realize that Buddhism is boring, so that you can really start doing the work of Buddhism, which is the turn really do that inner work be present to the practice. So that's what I thought to kind of get her where she meant stuff. So yes, they get to some point disenchanted

and in monastic life, and I think it happens to some degree in lay, lay spiritual life as well, but it's much more dramatic in monastic life because everything's a little more intensified. They're all their life is in practice. It's a relatively common phenomena that after somewhere between three and five years of residential monastic life, that a lot of people lose interest in the spiritual practice. And sometimes it's been when I was in Zen center, one of the many years ago, one of the teachers there said, Oh, yeah, because in the first years of practice, people are basically trying to find out who they are. And they're just trying to kind of deal with their psychology and deal with therapy on the cushion. But it takes about three to five years to do that very important work. And once they have found out who they are, feel much stronger sense of being centered in themselves and all that, then they're ready to go out in the world and live their life. That's great. But if they continue beyond that period of time, that's when they're, that's when Buddhist practice starts. I don't know what they were doing before but, but that's when they're, you know, they really get serious and that's really when they start delving deeper in. So in monastic life, sometimes there's a period of boredom that sets in between three to five years, and some people don't survive that period of boredom. They believe that the practice, but are those people who can hang in there and and, and not get influenced by the boredom and see see through work with it can move the practice on to another level. So if that happens to some of you, then you're going to have to now remember, Oh, look at that I've been practicing for a couple of years now, three, four years and losing interest because it seems kind of boring. You might want to look and see what's really going on for you. And really be very evaluate and study very carefully what the nature of that boredom is, and why you're getting bored. And, and look at what you're getting bored about. And if the boredom is about Buddhism, then use that opportunity to stop studying Buddhism. But start practicing what you studied. And if you practice well, if you practice it well It's not going to be boring. I suggest that you, you'll be very hard to get really bored. If you really know how to practice well, because you know the practice well, you'll turn as soon as you get bored. You'll turn your attention and look that boredom right in the eye. And when you really get to know someone, well, no matter who they are, you fall in love with everyone. That's my belief. So if you really turn around and look that boredom right in its eye, you'll fall in love with what you see, and you won't be bored. So and then the last thing I wanted to say is that again, in praise of boredom, is that there's a certain kind of boredom that is fallow time and fallow time is very important, I believe. Were a period of time we don't do anything. We're not all not involved in a lot of activities, social interactions, but things are really quiet, kind of boring, maybe boring even. So that something in the background in our minds or hearts can process and work through and settle out to do something. And, and it can't settle out unless, you know, while we're always doing things. So

sometimes there's kind of sacred boredom, where we're allowing some inner work to move through us and happen allows us to reflect more deeply question and think. So don't be afraid of boredom. And but make it part of your practice. Look at it, try to understand what's going on. And if what you need is a long fallow time, then contentedly allow yourself to be bored when you let some inner work unfold for you. So I hope that was in Interesting enough. Oh, and one announcement for the next three Monday evenings. I'm going to do a series of talks. So I've made on the on the, on the life of the Buddha and the Buddha, I thought it'd be nice for you, hopefully to hear a little bit about the Buddha himself. Now that I've told you that you're supposed to get disenchanted with Buddhism, maybe it's safe to give some series of talks on the founder of Buddhism.

So we'll do three three talks on life and a little bit teachings of the historical Buddha. So many thanks