

2009-12-06 Four Foundational Truths

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SPEAKERS

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One of the teachings of Buddhism that has come to be associated with most of the different schools of Buddhism is the teachings of the two truths, that there are two categories of truths that were useful to be aware of. And one of the interesting questions is how do we know what is true? Or how do we know what is real? And or how do we base our life and the meaning of our life on what is true and what is real, as opposed to what is maybe fictitious or imaginary. And so perhaps these idea that two truths might be interesting for you today. And the two truths, one is could be called fundamental truths are foundation maybe a bit better one fundamental foundational truths and that there are a basic truth in that they form the basis upon which the other truths are built. So foundational truths. And then the second one is designated truths, or conventional truths, truth by convention. So, the foundational truths are not ours kind of always true, they're always real in some way, and had nothing to do with convention or designation. And then there's a whole category of things that there are built on top of these foundational truths, which has a lot to do with. We say it's, that's the way it is. So for example, a designated truth would be that the address for IMC is 108 birch. It's not the foundational truth because the address can be changed. Those of you who've been IMC long enough know that just two years, just two years ago, we were 1305 1205 1205 1205 Hopkins and we haven't moved. And so that's just a convention that can change quite a bit. And however, the substance of the building, you know, this, the basic substance of it hasn't changed is more foundational to, and based on the substance of the building, we can then, you know, change the names as we wish to perhaps in a few more years, we'll decide another, another address would suit us better. And so it goes. Now, some designations, we could designate differently, but it's not very useful to do that because These are conventions that help us find our way together as a community. So we could, for example, decide that we don't like the birch street address. So we're going to call it you know, maybe this is where Buddhists grew up, we might call it maybe we call it awakening way, you know, 10108 awakening way. And that sounds very nice. It's kind of inspiring those who come, you know, awakening reminds us what we're here for. And, but the mail carrier is not going to know where to bring the mail. And people are going to go on Google Maps or whatever, and, and they're not going to find, you know, awakening way. So it's not, in that sense, it's not a particularly useful convention, if not enough of our society kind of goes along with that convention. So there's some conventions that there's a lot of consent around conventions, and some there's a very local consent. And sometimes the level of consent is just one person and that sometimes has a lot trouble. You're the only one who sees it that way. It's interesting that in the, in the time of the Buddha, the Buddha seemingly came up with a kind of fairy tale sometimes those myths or stories that he seemed to make up. And one of them is the origin story, the origin of the universe of the world. And it's probably best not to take it that he think of it that he actually believe this. But it seemed more like he kind of made up the story kind of, for pedagogical purposes. And, but in the story, he talks about the origins of the first ruler. And he very clearly says that the first ruler was a person who was designated

or elected as such, by the other people at the time, because there was a need, there was chaos. And so they did somewhat to have some order in the chaos. And so they designated someone as the leader. And that was the origin of the first rule. Now why that's significant in the context of ancient Buddhism, ancient India, is that there was a tradition of the rulers not being a designation, but being kind of absolute, you know, it's kind of absolute reality, you know, you're the you in the lineage of the Sun God, for example, or you know, your your origin comes from the very, your ruler by the desk by our Brahmin or your caste, for example, was created at the origin of the world. And if that's the way it is, it's a fixed thing. It's absolute. It's not something that can be changed. And the Buddha said no to designation, these things, and so people live with these designations. And to some of these designations of the that existed at the time of the Buddha. He didn't so much criticized exactly, exactly, but some of them he ignored. So for example, the cap system in India, he ignored it for the purposes of inviting people having people join the monastic orders or becoming a students he made no difference to anybody whether touchable or ruler or Brahman or warrior, whatever caste the person might be. And he talks about these things as being designations. We create a tremendous amount of suffering for each other human beings do by how we the conventions we use to describe each other. And we also do a lot of good the designations and all bad, but there can be a lot of a lot of suffering. When we call people certain things or see them certain ways, like the caste system does, can cause a lot of suffering.

So there's designated true Some are useful and some are not. And the designated truths are truths which are built on the foundational ones and if we have a sense can we can if we can experience the directly the foundational truths. And the idea is to experience them some people's called foundational truths. Those things which can be experienced directly, unmediated by a lot of concepts or ideas or conventions. If we can see if we can relate directly to or have experience of what's foundational, then it's much easier to see how the conventions are created, how we build these designations, names and ideas. If you don't see that, then it's sometimes designations are seen as being absolute, or this is the way it is. So there are four of these foundational truths. And the first is what's called the four primary elements. Rupa. And these are the four ways in which we can have four basic ways, major ways in which we have a direct experience. The physical world. So, all the different aspects of the physical world, whether its internal physical body or the external world out there is, is experienced in the ancient kind of language as being belong to the earth element, the water element, the air element or the fire element, and sometimes they add the space element as a fifth one. And these elements are not meant to be kind of early physics, but rather supposed to point to ways in which the physical world is experienced. So, the earth element for example, is the way we experience things being hard and soft or heavy and light. The air element has to do with movement like the wind, so, wind element, we feel movement, currently the wind you can feel, but other things we can actually sometimes feel movements in the body. Nowadays, sometimes we call it an energy movements, their body the ancient Indians called it The wind element was moving through perhaps. And the fire element has to do with heat and cold. And water element is to do with how things are the cohesive quality, like when you when you move your saliva around in your tongue, you can kind of this the saliva kind of sticks and kind of kind of cohesive cohesive qualities and just crumble together like powder. So it's not so easy to experience the water element they say. But all the different things in the body, they're kind of the way things are kind of glued or tied together is called the water element. And, and then there's, they're based on these four elements. There are other elements that come from them. So there's a whole series of minor elements, but these are four primary ways of actually experiencing the world. Now why what is entropy Why does is interesting is that you can actually have a direct experience of smoothness, hardness heaviness, you can have a direct experience with some of the minor elements like colors, more of them are minor ones, you can see color and shape and things like that, like experiencing them. And then you can see and watch how the mind the mind is sharp enough, you can see how the mind puts on top of that primary experience a label designation, or what it is. And, and that designation might might or might not

be accurate. So for example, when I stepped on a Long Branch at twilight, in jungles of Thailand was branch six foot branch so that was sticking out called path dirt path. It was a branch was okay to step on until it moved. And it was a big snake. And so well that was interesting. Stepping on a six foot snake in the jungle. The

So sometimes accurate sometimes not. But also sometimes these designations are flexible and fluid. So for example, you could have a table that might in one situation be a dining room table, another situation be a writing table, you move moving someplace else, and maybe it could be a massage table, it could be a place to do an art table. It could be for little kids, it can be come to Fort, you know, leave my fort alone. And, and becomes very important. It can be a lot of arguments about that fort among the kids. And, and somewhat fluid what this piece of wood is. And so when we go into someone's house and see this wooden square thing that feels hard, the mind will will evaluate, you know where it is and where it is in the house and how it's being used. And to kind of decide what actually it might be. It's Oh, this is a dining Table Oh, this is something else and some things are quite fluid. I have this bell here in front of me that you know five foot diameter Bell or something. And I remember once being in downtown San Francisco many years ago and coming across someone who was panhandling asking for money and he had a bell just like this a beautiful Japanese bell. That was his begging bowl. And I don't know I might regret I didn't go back and stop him and ask him You know what, what do you do? What are you doing with that bell was quite beautiful brass, bronze, so it's really beautiful thick sides and it's quite something to have. And another was maybe a pity that it was a being used for begging and when it could make a beautiful sound. So sometimes desert so some things some things are, what they are based on how they're used, not what they are in and of themselves. So the spell again, we are here at IMC we designated as a bell, most of you would like me to use it as a bell. And that's kind of the convention we have. Most of you would not appreciate it if I used it as a spittoon. But you know, it would make a very good one. You know, and we have another Bell over there. So that could be our bell, and this could be gills. spittoon. And in Asia is among some of the Buddhist teachers that I practiced with there. In fact, they use buttons during the Dharma talks, you'd hear this guard rolling around. And who says that a Dharma teacher shouldn't spit during during a Dharma talk. We should vote. There should be consent. A convention so you're here at least here in the West. The convention is that Dharma teachers usually don't spit during a doc. And most of you appreciate that. But as these things are quite fluid, you know, they change depending on culture conditions, many different things. So if you have a sense of how there's a raw experience of physical object, the mind gets simple enough to experience and in and of itself, then you can watch and see how we add all these designations on top. Very interesting when I think a fun one is that point out is that most of you here today, I've taken off your shoes. And now if you if we all leave here with different shoes that we came with, our shoes wouldn't care. You know, with shoes don't care what, who cares? Where's the caring, the caring belongs to designation. I remember once, many years ago when we met in Palo Alto I had Birkenstocks. A lot of people had Birkenstocks back then. And periodically, I'd go out, get my Birkenstocks and that was someone else's there. And so I'd go home with somebody else's. And remember once there was a three way switch, Birkenstocks, somehow it happened. And one time that had happened, I ended up with a better pair. And no one ever claimed, you know, no one ever noticed that, you know, mine were kind of ready, and that no one came back and said, you know, where are my shoes? So, as a result, at some point, those newer Birkenstocks was when it was fair enough to designate them as mine. You know, I don't know after a few months or a year wearing them, they remind right are they really mine? That you have my my shoes my things is at its best. I don't think I don't think you want them anymore.

And the so you know how fluid are these designations and we see them as designations. There's an ancient teaching and Buddhism or analogy of children playing in the sand making sand castles all day long and arguing and fighting but this is my sand castle lien by sand castle castle alone and someone

coming along and knocking down and one of the kids sandcastle being all upset he proved my sandcastle and the end of the day comes along and they all kind of hold hands and run off together to go home. And then the way the tide comes in and washes all the sand castles away. You know, it's mine at particular time, so important that in there. And so it's very fascinating to watch the designation of mine On top of something, you know, all of you come here today, have some degree, maybe not even thinking about it consciously have designated the place you're sitting as my place. So, some of you know, if you had to get up and go to the bathroom and you left your cushion on the floor, you left your chair empty, and you came back and someone was sitting in your chair on that cushion. You'd feel a little bit off, because that's, you know, that was my place. But in an hour when we all leave here, you know, the fact that this is your chair, you probably the next time you come You won't remember which were which was mine was somewhere around there I was sitting. How we designate things is very consequential. There's a lot of suffering, a lot of conflict that arises because of it. There's no designation people disagree about what things are. So for Example, in a marriage or in a partnership, if people have fundamentally different understandings of what the agreement is, in the partnership, they can miss each other can be a lot of conflict, there has to be a shared consent or shared convention about what partnership means. And the partnership is a convention, but it's a very important one for that relationship. So how does that get constructed? And what are all the things that feed into that construction? have an idea of what a partnership supposed to be? There's a lot of cultural ideas, a lot of family ideas person based on personal experience. It's a very complex thing when two people come together, even in a friendship, and so do we, what do we share? And what do we understand? We don't just see a person walking down the street, we see understanding what it means to be a person, what our relationship to that person is. There's a lot that gets built on. So one The advantages of mindfulness practice is to let the mind become sharp enough to be able to distinguish between what an experience is, and its fundamental aspects versus what the experience is with the addition of the designation we have on top of it. So even as simple as a traffic light, you know, green, orange, green, yellow and red, right? The it doesn't take much mental power effort to see the red light and that means stop. But the stopping acid designation is not inherent in the color red that we should stop. We've just come to our culture decide that's what it is. And so it's an activity of mine. That's an overlay on top of the redness. And it's possible if your mind is still enough and quiet enough it's possible to watch something as subtle as the red means stop. Arise up in the mind, I thought, if the mind is very busy, you don't see it because it's kind of a waste, waste of, you know time to start referring to everything seeing everything that way. But it's kind of innocent enough with a traffic light. But how innocent Is it is it with me myself in mind, all the designations of this is mine are the kinds of values that we overlay on top. So the first foundational truth is the physical way we the way we experience physical reality. The second is called citta, in Sanskrit or Pali and citta is usually translated into English as consciousness. And for this purposes today, probably that's good enough the state of the mind. Some people call it awareness.

But there's something about the way that mine knows the quality overall quality of this knowing Mind, which is pretty foundational, you can be aware of the knowing and the sense of clear, pristine knowing of something. And the reference point that I have for this is some years ago I loved watching looking at old photographs, the older the better really old. So, the people in the photographs and the people in the photographs, and the people are certainly long dead. And I would love to look I like to look at their faces, in particular I was drawn to their eyes. And, and you could see all this expressively sometimes in eyes and photographs 100 years ago, 120 years ago, and sometimes the photographs are very clear. And you could see the sometimes you see a spark, of life of awareness of an expression of a smile or despair wearing or something, some moment of life in his head, look at that photograph and realize that was that person's moment to be conscious. And this is my moment for me to be conscious. And looking at this old photographs and realizing that person's long dead height and for me the importance or the connection I had to being present and aware here and now. Because it's easy and easy enough for me

not to really feel in some kind of high quality way. My presence, my awareness, my consciousness, as it occurs in the moment. So it's possible to spend a lot of time thinking about the past. It's possible think a lot about the future. In fact, the thinking mind or the visioning mind, is usually thinking about something. And, and we're thinking about something, we're usually concerned about what we're thinking about. And so in a sense, we're kind of looking at the about thing. So much that we don't see the knowing the awareness, the activity itself, of, of thinking or being aware. So, so, example would be that if I'm

upset with someone. I'm thinking about that person. And I'm really concerned, very, very concerned about that person, what's right, what's wrong, what has to happen, and I'm pulled into those thoughts. And the idea of feeling a sense of me being present and aware and kind of open awareness really clearly. knows I am thinking right now can get lost. And there's a huge qualitative difference difference between being lost in a concern and a thought versus stepping back and being able to be clearly aware, oh, I'm thinking about this right now, too, to be lost and a concern is it very easy to get lost in the world of clinging and attachment. And to step back and to realize that there's another whole other side to what's happening. Not only is there what we're thinking about, but there's a there's a subjective experience of thinking, the subjective experience of being aware of knowing and Buddha's and puts a tremendous emphasis on the importance of that other half of life. The knowing half the subjective experience of being present presence, knowing many people overemphasize involvement with their concerns and lose themselves in that process. being concerned about things is fine, but losing oneself can be problematic. So by looking at these old photographs, it was one of the places where I was reminded, oh, to be conscious to be aware, awareness only happens in the living present. If I'm thinking too much about the past or the future or fantasy, then I'm not in this spark of this moment, of being aware and presence. And that's one of the foundational truths of this capacity to know and to be aware to be conscious. And if we're, if we're aware of it in touch with it, then again, it's easy to see it's how we leave that behind, or how we pick up concerns and issues. And then even more important, why do we do that? Why do we get lost in concerns? Why do we get lost in my resentments? Or my fears? Or my desires and what I want to see happen? Why do I get pulled this way in that? If you're centered and really feeling strongly that I'm here now, rooted here. Then the winds of the mind come through and you can see them come through you can see thoughts arise, you can see concerns arise. And you as you see them arise, you can also then question what values are is my involvement based on? Is it based on in Buddhist Buddhist language, greed, hate and delusion is it based on love or generosity and wisdom is a based on defending some sense of self building up some sense of self is it based on trying to Get something from other people and see what's going on around me? Or is it based on trying to be open and present to the situation, to discover what's there to receive what's here in some open, generous way. So a lot of mindfulness practice is pointing back to the benefits of feeling sensing, being aware. And there's something about being aware or consciousness, which is considered foundational. It's not a designation, to be conscious. It's not a convention. The third foundational truth that again something we can experience directly is in Buddhism is called Chitta seekers, which translates as mental factors and mental factors means all the different activity of the mind that so for example, You want something that one thing is a mental factor, if you put your attention someplace directed a certain place that directing attention is a mental factor. If you

if you have equanimity for what's happening that equanimity is a mental factor. If there's greed, hate and delusion, it's a mental factor, if there's each of those is a mental factor. And so there's 54 of these mental factors mental activities found a foundational mental activities in the mind. They're the foundation that arise not because of designation or convention. They're not tied to they're not directly tied to more complicated evaluation might be the more primary or, or primordial and what to call them. The movements of the mind and these can be known directly as well. So and what's interesting in the tradition, there's, there's basically if I remember right, four classes of these mental facts There's no

mental as those mental activities that occur all the time. Some basic idea of attention happens all the time. energy in the mind is happens all the time. Some are particulars which only occur sometimes. Some are called unskillful. They're not helpful. They cause harm. And then you think that the next one would be would be the skillful ones. This you can see that duality that distinction is used a lot in Buddhism, skillful and unskillful. But rather than calling it skillful, that tradition calls it beautiful. The beautiful states of mind, beautiful, are activities of mind. That beautiful. So recognition and there's there's beauty inside of us. And so compassion is one of those beautiful activities of mind. sympathetic joy. There's a whole range of them. They say non greed, non hate and non delusion. But usually that's understood. That's the literal translation. But tradition understands that to be loving kindness, generosity, to be wisdom, those are activities of the mind. When we can be clearly, strongly aware of the activity of the mind, and the same time have be strongly aware of the knowing faculty. That's when I think the strong sense of presence said the sense of presence becomes quite strong. presence is kind of a vague thing, what is presence, kind of, or when all these things when the idea of being strongly connected to our physical life or body, the energies, the sensations of our body, aware of knowing faculty itself, where the mental functioning of the mind strongly when all those things Clearly known, then there's a strong sense of presence being here. I think without a strong sense of with a strong sense of presence comes a clear knowing of what's happening here. And so, if we want to be connected to what's to life directly, you want to be connected to these foundational aspects. Now, when we connect to these foundational aspects, then we build on that to create our more complicated world. Our world of our beliefs, world of our designations, and concepts, world of our relationship to other people in other things. And when we start developing these more complicated worlds personal worlds, that we have to walk through and live and negotiate with, what are the values that we build it on? What provides meaning to the business Personal world that we're creating and building here. And I think the suggestion here is that when you're clearly aware of what's fundamental, what's foundational, it's a lot easier to understand where meaning and values can come from. So for example, if you're aware of the mental factors, and aware of our body much more closely, it's possible to see what is beautiful and what is unskillful what it what brings benefit, and what causes harm, and be able to clearly see the beneficial as a beneficiary on the harmful harmful creates a very clear guidance for what is useful important in this life of ours. Is it useful? to pursue a lot of wealth? Is it useful to pursue having a lot of friends on Facebook? Is it useful to pursue having a big big house or a special car or fancy clothes or, you know a lot of things people pursue

thinking that their security and happiness income with those things. But if you really look closely in touch with that foundational aspect of our life, you might see that the pursuing those for the wrong reasons, is not going to bring happiness. That happiness resides in this world of other mental factors mental activity, activities of our heart. And if we're operating with mental activity that involves greed, hate and delusion, we're not going to become happy. But if we recognize how we can take responsibility to cultivate and develop the beautiful qualities in our hearts and mind, then we create the conditions for a more reliable happiness that's much more reliable than the happiness that comes with how much money money's in your bank or what kind of job you have and what kind of partnership relationship you have with people. So To begin seeing that, and then as you become aware of the beautiful qualities of the mind, beautiful capacities in the mind, it's not just our mind. But it's also the minds of other people. The potential for these beautiful minds is available for everyone. And so one of the things you can get meaning for our life is how do we live a life that supports this beauty supports this purity in ourselves and others? How can we live our life? So you go to work? And hopefully your job is not just about making money? I think be very unfortunate if all the job is about is making money. But if there's people that you encounter when you work, part of your job is how you are in those connections with people that you have. And are you connecting and operating in such a way that you're supporting? Happiness well being and beauty in her beauty to develop in this community of people that

you know so so that gives a kind of guideline for meaning and value. So far I've talked about three of these foundational truths. There is the physical experiences of the four elements. There is consciousness, there's mental factors. And the third thing that's foundational, meaning that it can be experienced directly, it's not mediated by concepts and ideas, conventions, is Nibbana, Nirvana. And here we take Nirvana as the experience of release the experience of freedom. If you clench your head fist for a really long time, so it really hurts. And then finally, you release your fist. You'll feel relief, you'll feel the release. It's unarguable. You'll feel that if you keep your mind control attracted really tight over some concerns and you're really angry and the anger gets lifted, you can feel that lifting that release that happens. If you're really afraid of something and then the fear lifts, dissolves, you can feel that dissolving of it and the relief that comes that experience of the release of what is held, grasped clung to, is very is is belong is that belongs to this world of Nibbana or Nirvana. Nirvana is that experience of freedom of release, it can happen in small ways. It can happen in big ways. And that is not something which is convention or designation, but something could be experienced directly. And, and when when you have a visceral, immediate sense of how beneficial and how wonderful it is to have this experience of release. That also then becomes a guide for finding meaning and value in our lives. Not just for ourselves personally, but also to understand what's possible for our community for others as well. And how we perhaps take care of creating a community, a society where the possibility of freedom is supported.

And then based on these four foundational truths, of knowing on them, then we start putting together conventions and concepts. So, insight meditation Center here in Redwood City, it's just a convention. It's a convention that hopefully supports the cultivation of beautiful states of mind, cultivation of strong mindfulness and awareness, and hopefully place it cultivates The cultivates freedom and liberation for people. That's what's really important here, the building, the address, the name of the place, there's a lot of things here that are just conventions that we've, we've kind of, to our best of our abilities have gathered together and created and agree on. Because we think it's useful as a way of for community to come together and explore these foundational possibilities. Some of our conventions we have here are pretty complicated. Like, for example, we have a volunteer director and Hillary, it's just a convention. But it's a convention that we think is very useful. We have a lot of we have a lot of gratitude for. So how do we hold something when we see it as a convention? is a very interesting question. And if we understand that the value of the conventions is to support something more important conventions, then hopefully we hold the conventions in a different way. If we think the convention itself is the point and the purpose, then it's very easy to get end up not only with a lot of suffering but with a lot of conflict. So hopefully as we mindfulness become stronger understanding of these aspects of life become stronger, we become more fluid and relaxed around conventions about the designated truths. So two truths, foundational truth and designated truth, both are important. And but if the foundational truth can be the foundation, then the designated truth can do its work the best and the best way can. If there is no foundation for the designated truth, or we take a designated truth as a foundation, then we're in trouble. So let's return to fundamentals. So there was okay, a little bit of Buddhist theory of truth and thank you all very much