

2010-02-15 How Do You Hold Beliefs

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SPEAKERS

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Last few days, the topic has been on my mind a little bit is the Buddhist teachings on views. And there's a word view in English can mean to, you know, something you see, like the vista you see. But it also means an opinion, philosophy. If you have a worldview, it's kind of the fundamental kind of world worldview world kind of philosophy in which someone lives their lives through. And it happens that in Buddhist language in Pali, they have a word that has one word that has both meanings as well. The word *ditthi* also means to see or what's seen, and then it also means an opinion or philosophy that a person might have. And there's a lot of discussion about views in the early Buddhist tradition. And as I kind of looked into it a little bit and I think one of the key things I pulled out of there is the question of what's our view about views? What are our beliefs about beliefs? And people seldom step back. A lot of people have beliefs. But people seldom step back to look at what do they believe about beliefs. So an obvious one, for example, is that some people believe that their beliefs are true, and the only truth or they believe people might believe that it's very important to believe that you have to believe you have to have an opinion some people feel like you can't go to a party without having your opinion ready at hand. And, you know, what are some of the underlying assumptions behind holding a belief?

My one of my favorite stories in this regard is from a movie by Woody Allen Where there's this debate, there's this Jewish seder, or this Jewish, I guess, what's it called kind of a whole sacred dinner that they have meal that they have. And there's a ritual that goes along with it. And so the family and extended family sitting around the table, and they're getting ready for this ritual before the eat. And there's an argument with a father, the head of the family, who is arguing to do the full blown ritual, which apparently is quite involved. And the young, sometimes called secular daughter, who argues no, no, let's just get over let's not do it at all, you know, so they go back and forth. And so finally the daughter says, What do you prefer? The truth or God? That's a quite a trade off and The father says, Oh, I have to choose between the two, I would choose God. Because without God, there'd be chaos, social chaos, to be nothing that kept people in line. So here he has a belief in God, but the underlying assumption around the belief in God is that without such a belief, that society is not going to be held together. And you need to have that for social cohesion for social harmony for just people getting along, you'd have a very strong, maybe, you know, external father figure that is going to judge you. And only by having such a figure, can you really, you know, keep everyone in line. So what are the beliefs that you hold around beliefs is a I think, a very interesting topic. The lot of people have a lot of beliefs about other people's beliefs and how they hold them. And it can be very hard to turn around and look and see you know, You know, I don't have any beliefs at all, I just have the truth.

And we laugh at that. But, in fact, I think it's very hard sometimes to differentiate between what we say see as a truth and what we believe. Some things, some book beliefs are are placed in young tender impressionable kids minds by their family, for example in their society when they're, you know, as

they're growing up. And as kids are learning language learning sense of who they are learning who the sense of their parents are, their society is kind of as a kind of creating and constructing a whole world for themselves as they grew up kind of entangled or in meshed in that social creation are some deeply seated beliefs and it's just for the kids growing up, it just seems that's the way it is. It's so powerful. That's the way it is that there's no questioning it. It's like you know, the sky is blue. You know, Zeus is up there with this Thunderbolts. antenna is you know, doing mischief. Poseidon is reigning over the sea. Thor you know, looking at looking for his hammer. You know or whatever, you know there's a lot of the world has a huge huge huge huge collection of beliefs that people in the past to the held as being this is the way it is that are now for the most for the most part obsolete that most people now very few people like believe in Zeus and Thor anymore and are few. I don't want to discriminate. I said there's a few but it's pretty, you know, and but we still have some beliefs which have not applied Delete yet. And so, you know, eventually they will be. But you know, they're deeply embedded and it's hard to disentangle ourselves from it. And to see that it's belief.

Buddhists have this to certain. Buddhists, Buddhists have some deeply held beliefs that some Buddhists hold on to and they say this is how things are. It could be argued, perhaps or said, that belief in rebirth is one of those things that Buddhists growing up in Buddhist cultures, that's a deeply embedded belief that kind of is comes along with the whole construction of self and in society. And it's inconceivable that would be any different. And perhaps, it's true, that there's rebirth I don't know. But most people who believe in it don't have any evidence for it. So it becomes a belief and becomes a belief they see as being true. And if you question what basis do we have that belief Many people will say, because that's what my religion says with my society says with my family, I said, by logic says that it just seems that our rational that there should be how could it be life without, you know, happy human being just appear if there hadn't been something before? How about or just feels right? You know, or you know, I just prefer it that way. It's too bleak if it is. And so that you know, so there's all these kind of rationales or reasons for believing what people believe. And what Buddhism asks us to do is to look at how we hold our beliefs and what's behind the beliefs, what are the assumptions and what goes on behind them. And it might be more useful to look at those two questions than it is to look at is the belief True or false? Because sometimes once you kind of get underneath how you hold it, your relationship to the belief and the underlying beliefs or ideas that support that belief, if you really address those carefully, then sometimes the original belief becomes maybe irrelevant, maybe not so interesting. So beliefs, opinions, views. So we have this at home we have this cast iron frying pan, at free wash it, we stick it on. And by the way, we fry things in it, but it gets really handled gets really hot because it's also iron. So we put the host and so a few days ago, I went to pick it up and it was hot. And you could probably imagine Quickly, I removed my hand from it.

The, you know, you know, they say there's these automatic instincts that operate you know, think about it even just put my hand got released from the frying pan did I have to have a belief that removing my hand from the frying pan was a good idea? You know, I can look at what I believe about frying pans and heat and hands. You know, let me think about it. And maybe I should really question my assumptions here about it. You know, I think was just is kind of obvious it kind of that releasing from the frying pan doesn't operate at the level of beliefs. My feeling about Buddhism is that Buddhism is not a belief doesn't have to be belief at all. It doesn't operate in the realms of belief, but operates much more in the realm of the kind of the obvious That if you touch the frying pan, you release it. If you're doing something that's painful, and it's obvious, you release yourself from it, you stop it. So, one of the reasons why we developed develop mindfulness, cultivate mindfulness and concentration all these things is to heightened our sensitivity. So that we see with greater subtlety the frying pans we hold on to. So for example, if I I might easily see a frying pan, but say that I feel angry at somebody can you see and feel the anger so acutely how it is to be angry that your relationship to it is so obvious as it

would be touching the hot frying pan. Oh, those angry thoughts angry feelings are coming up. I don't think I want to pick that up. It just hurts to do that. You don't have to have a belief that it's bad to be angry. Because you can feel if you're very sensitive, you feel how that's uncomfortable. Or you might, maybe more subtly, you might see that you're having a conversation with someone and you would like them to think really well of you. Like you're really special. And so you say something very subtle. And so for example, some people will do something like this where they they go out to a restaurant and they say, you know that burritos burrito stand that I ate that is that offering makes the best burritos and Allah California was really the best place. And you know, have you gone out and sampled all the burrito shops. You know, it's kind of a little bit you know, it's kind of like hyper hyperbolic kind of risk taker policlinico he's talking. But sometimes when people talk that way, they're just enthusiastic. But sometimes, it's a way of saying, I'm special. Now, that's kind of subtle that's going on. But if we looked more deeply, we're very, very sensitive. You can feel the pain, the burn, the burn marks of saying that, of operating that way. And if you're very sensitive, you see that and you let go, need to go there. So then in relationship to beliefs, if you say, you know, Buddhism is the only true religion. You know, I'd be willing to go out there and argue with my friends and really show them the true light and this Buddhism is really where it's at. If you're really really sensitive, I think the chances are very high that you'll feel you'll see how that's a frying pan for you. The way you're grasping onto the holding onto it hurts and you'll naturally wanna let go, lighten up around your Buddhism please. And Buddhism is not meant to be held at all, it's not meant to be clutched or clinked clung to. It's not meant to be a, a, something we acquire for status, for security to look good in the eyes of others. It's not, it's not meant to be, you know, you know, to be a counter to other people's beliefs. It's not meant to be a belief that we hold, but rather it's a training and how to become sensitive. So that what seems what is natural or obvious can operate for us. So when so you find a lot of stories where in the ancient texts the Buddha, someone asks the Buddha, what do you believe?

And the Buddha says, kind of seemingly cryptic there. The cryptic for the, for the listener, he says things like, I don't I don't need to believe anything anymore or I, I hold myself I hold the beliefs that in such a way that I there's no cause for me to argue with anybody in the world. He's not putting it against the counter anybody else's beliefs how he is. And he says it says it's very dramatic things at times he says encountering people who cling to beliefs ideas, says the path of freedom is not found. Through beliefs. It's not found by tradition. It's not found by virtue. It's not found by spiritual practices. It's not found in texts. But he also says it's not Not Found apart from those things, also. But the liberation is found by not clinging. By not holding on to that frying pan. And if you're not holding on to the frying pan, if that's the whole, that's this the focus, if you've freed yourself from holding on to the frying pan, why would you pick up a new frying pan? Why would you pick up a new belief system that would cause you to burn? So part of the Buddhist approach to beliefs is a big part of is our relationship to beliefs, how do we hold it? And this is a very important issue in a pluralistic society. And I think that the modern world is very much challenged to try to figure out how all these different belief systems are going to coexist. Because there's, you know, used to be that society was much more homogenous than it is now. And so if you know You know, everywhere you went and he, you know, you may be the furthest you ever walked from your village, he was, you know, 20 miles, everyone in that 20 mile radius believe the same thing as you. But here, if you walk 20 miles from Redwood City, and tallied up all the different religions and beliefs and stuff, you find a big wide range. How do we coexist? And so one of the one of the things that Buddhism encourages people to do is to for us to look at how do we hold our beliefs? And do we burn ourselves and how we hold it? Or do we burn others by how we hold it? And that's part of the problem with beliefs is we often burned a lot of other people in the process of our having our beliefs. So one of the questions. So one another way of getting at this question of our relationship to beliefs, is why do we believe? Why do I believe what we believe? What is it what are we trying to accomplish through those beliefs? And if we can look at that in question, then we can also wonder, are there better ways of

accomplishing the same thing. And so again, this is also kind of a direction that Buddhism goes. It says that the that, if what we want is liberation. We want to set it set the heart the mind free, which is one of the happiest things the mind can experience. That happiness does not depend on having beliefs but rather on the sensitivity that helps the mind. Let go of its frying pence. That's hard to believe. Because sometimes you can have to code partly because what evidence do you have partly because there's very strong beliefs that people carry, but what it's what Take screams they get happy. Often those beliefs come along with the idea that something has to happen for me to be happy without something happening, how can I possibly be happy? It has to be I have to have a friend, I have to have a job, I have to have health, I have to have recreational opportunities I have to have, you know, something. And the remarkable thing that can be discovered is how little the mind actually needs for it to be happy to feel secure and safe in itself.

So as long as we believe that our happiness is through found outside of ourselves and having things then you know, it's very hard to turn the attention around. To turn the attention away from the world of things, and people in relationships long enough to develop the inner sensitivity to see where the frying pans are in ourselves and then let the frying pans cool down. And, you know and experience the happiness of letting go on clinging. So the Buddha said such things as people asked him about his beliefs, he said, Why should someone who doesn't claim have any concern with beliefs? The interesting statement with views, opinions philosophies that is that lead Buddhism as being kind of a someone who's involved in Buddhist practice spiritually poor or a simpleton? Not left with you know, Buddhism just leaves the house leaves me though No beliefs at all. Just not hold on to anything. how's that gonna work as I go about the world? Don't you have to have some beliefs on how to believe in democracy democracy? If I'm gonna live here in this country, so you can go vote, shouldn't I believe in she believe in dollar bills, says In God we trust that we should believe are the things we're supposed to believe in. So in this regard, Buddhism points out that there are conventions that people share. And those conventions, if we want to operate with other people, it's useful to know what those agreements are, and then go along with those agreements if you want to cooperate in some way. And so it isn't so much that we believe the almighty dollar as it is that we got to agree to go along with the convention, that the dollar means this means something. Democracy is a convention that we go along and participate in for the greater good. But certainly the last thing I want to say is that I believe that there are two major struggles, around beliefs in our society. And one is between absolutists people who believe there are absolute truths absolute in us and often attended those people tend to be fundamentalists in religious world. And there are Buddhist fundamentalists who did not free from that just and the other might be called relativists. People believe that all truths are relative, or are their conventions that created there's here the very popular word these days. Critics accuse critically is that there's there are secular truths, heaven forbid Given that you're, you're secular and then Stephen Batchelor who loves the word secular, secular just means of the times it's been used in contrast to the sacred or the religious. And you know secular values are supposed to better know what secular values is what goes on that you know, that's just really bad. But secular just means values of the times. And no sorry, always connected to here and now as opposed to values are connected to some other time, other place, other world that has no connection to what's living in here. And so the criticism of some people the absolute is sometimes criticized the relativists for saying this is just you're just making up your truths. There's nothing really essential here but us making it up and you can't really do that. That's not really ultimate. And what I'd like to suggest is that Buddhism is not quite either one It's, or maybe it's a hybrid of the two. Because it's not just simply up to us to make up our truths make up our beliefs and views and stuff like that. Buddhism understands a lot of beliefs or conventions, a lot of beliefs are created. It's not exactly absolute, in the sense that there's an absolute outside of us, like a God who decrees This is what you should believe. But Buddhism, at the heart of it is like leasing your hand from

that hot frying pan. Is that that's not exactly a convention that's socially constructed. Oh, it's a relative thing.

You know, you should use your hand. You know, that's true in some societies, but I don't know there's you know, so it's not really convention is not really a social construct. But it is it do we say that it's an absolute truth? It's absolutely true. Maybe it doesn't belong either category, or maybe it is absolute. Or maybe what some people like to say it's a natural law. It's just that way things are the Dharma. Sometimes it's the word Dharma sometimes just translated translated as a natural law. So it's not a belief, it's not a view. But it's the natural law that when you are burning when you're in pain, you look to relief from that pain. I said that was last thing I'll say, but I'll say that was last thing I was gonna say before I said, say this.

Some people might protest this kind of approach to a religious life, because it's mostly emphasizes Doesn't emphasize it doesn't doesn't offer a wonderfully inspiring belief. That you can set your course by. It seems to mostly talk about, you know, just pain, we're getting burned a lot. And that's not a very heavy message. And it doesn't seem to offer much you know, and I'd rather go down the street where they dance with their religion. We should dance to probably. But I think you can really understand. I hope you understand this as you develop a heightened sensitivity, heightened mindfulness, how incredibly, incredibly profound that potential that possibility is, of having a mind or heart which doesn't cling. You know, it's one of the most beautiful things or I think it's the most beautiful thing that a person can ever witness is a heart that's set free. And so what's profound about, I think profoundly significant about Buddhism, it points to this profound potential possibility without requiring you to have any beliefs you know, any real metaphysical beliefs or religious beliefs, it helps if you believe that's possible to become free. But that's a little bit different. Like it helps you know helps to know it's possible to let go the frying pan. So anyway, so those are my thoughts for today. So that we have 10 minutes. So maybe you want to tell us tell me, your your beliefs. Where would you like to have any questions, concerns protests?

Would you be willing to

share with us

what was going on in your Life and what it was that attracted you to Buddhism.

There were three there were, I can say like four different things that really got me started, who got me involved deeply. The first was that was the Vietnam War. And being a pacifist, and feeling that as a pacifist if I was going to protest the war, that had to be willing to put my life on the line, and I was afraid to do that. And I was looking for some techniques, some way of addressing my fear. So I can live according to my my beliefs, you know, whether the values that I had, so I found Buddhism as a possibility for doing that. The same time around the same time, I was going to school at UC Santa Barbara where they just they had this huge oil spill down there and The environmental movement was really taking off. And so I was studying a lot of ecology and was gonna be a flaming environmentalist. And, and then, but as we studied the issues of what my friends and I'm taking classes and stuff is it was not really environmental studies issues we should be building, it's political, if you want change, to be to political science classes, after doing that for a while said, Oh, we can't really do much change politically. What you really need is a change of consciousness. That was a word of expression back then. And so then we started looking into Eastern religions as a way of different way different cultures and different way of looking and seeing the world. So that was a second interest. The third was that what I think is really, the hook they really got me was I was living on a large commune, and kind of the Bible on the

commune was Zen mind, beginner's mind. This book, since everyone was reading it I read it. And as I read it, it seemed to it was had this feeling that I had that, that I was reading my own mind is like, you know, volatility This is all stuff that I know but I never thought about before. So it was a kind of feeling of coming home or familiarity or just this is it kind of and, and the book seemed to talk about a lot about sitting in meditation. So at some point, I started to sit and meditate and just tried it out. And very quickly, I felt in meditation, I felt a feeling of rightness, a feeling of freedom, the feeling of relief, the feeling of integrity, that was very important for me. And so goes down those feelings that that experience that I had, that then pulled me into the world of more and more meditation and that brought me into the world of Buddhist meditation centers as a way of deepening or expanding out that experience that I was having in meditation. And as I went deeper and deeper into the Buddha centers, and I kind of went deeper into this Buddhist world, and it wasn't so much the pursuit of Buddhism as it was preceded the pursuit of this freedom that I experienced the meditation to make it fuller and more deeper. And eventually, I was so deeply into all this stuff that I decided that I guess I should call myself Buddhist. just just just to make it easier for people you know, otherwise have to go through a long explanation or what am I what else about? They don't want that. People just want to hear, you know, you're Buddhist and then that's that that's why does it help

Because

I don't have to have you have given me the freedom to not have to cling to a doctrine of any sort, but to enjoy the freedom that the practice has brought me. Beautiful, and

it's a tremendous gift.

And so, I know that we've talked, I know you're very much involved in another religion. And what's quite beautiful about I think about the way Buddhism holds itself as a religion is that because it holds belief so differently than other religions, there's no conflict. It doesn't hold it doesn't hold itself in conflict with other beliefs. People are welcome to believe all kinds of things and do this practice of freedom. And so the idea of conflict, I remember once was a TA at Stanford ta for religious studies class. And there was a freshman woman from I think she was like, we tennis Arkansas someplace, and the boonies growing up growing up in a very Christian environment. And, you know, she's just, like coming to Stanford was her like introduction to a wider world. And here she was taking this religious studies class. And it had me as a TA. And, and I said in the discussion, I said that, because we're talking about Buddhism in the, in the class, I said, from point of view of Buddhism, there's no conflict between being a Christian and a Buddhist. And her eyes got really wide. That was like revolutionary for her.

The Vinaya which is like 277, or something, monastic. NET beliefs, I guess, but code of conduct. So I'm curious how that kind of goes with what you're talking about. If it does or not. Dinner, because it seems to be held fairly strongly in the monasteries I've been around.

Well, when you go into when you go into a kitchen, one of the rules you should live by is that don't put your hand on the oven on the front on the stovetop, and before you've checked out whether something's on or not, that's a really good rule to live by. So those, they just the monks have 227 of those rules, rules that help them so they don't get burnt. Some of them seem old and archaic. So they've made up in archaic times. What do you expect and they were made up in such a way or the tradition felt that That they had no authority to change them. The tradition decided early on right after the Buddha died. See what I said Nanda, the Buddha's attendant said, Can we change any of these rules? And he said, you can change the minor ones. And then, when Ananda told that after the Buddha

died that night, I told that to all the other monks who they assembled to talk about this stuff, they said to him, do you ask him which are the minor rules?

And he said, No. So they decided that they would err on the side have been changing any of them. And so that's become kind of the that's been the default for all these centuries. So let's just stick with these and not not be the ones trying to change what the Buddha ordained. So it's Seems a little odd. But if you if what you do is you're seeing see it as rules of training as opposed to belief, then if those rules are training, support that actual training of certain people, then they're useful if they don't support the training or if they gone the other direction than they're not. And they certainly go in the other direction away from training towards freedom. Did they train towards slavery really, if they're held the wrong way? And if they're held lightly, in a way and use the tools to be supportive when I was ordained as a monk and Burma, I didn't really do it because of those 227 rules. I didn't really have a much higher regard for the elders rules when I was going to live by them, but I didn't really think about them much. But I was really surprised as I live by the rules, how supportive they were Some of them do seem archaic. But a large number of them had a lot to do with encouraging you to be mindful. And so for example, you know, the monks wear robes. And the hem is supposed to be one of the rules is the hands are supposed to be lined up. And so that's the rule I live by is to keep my hand my different robe, or robe hems or hams lined up, I had to be pretty mindful, because they were always slipping off those ropes. So that was a mindful thing. Or you were told that you couldn't take anything unless it was offered you. And as you know, so if you go into someone's home, like as a lay person or going to someone's home, and they have a coffee table book, you know, like on display in their coffee table, you know, it's okay to pick it up and look at it, knowing that like it's kind of understood, right. But as a monastic, you can't do that. You can sit there and look, you know, quiet, you know, look down. And if you can't pick it up, unless they say here, take a look at the book. And so that's a great training in mindfulness for people who are impulsive. It means that you can't just kind of just impossibly do some get to pay attention notice your impulses and train yourself to to wait. Well, are we last one, please.

brings to mind for me something that

I do. And I've been told or maybe I've seen that I should re examine it. And this rule, the business of looking at the book, I go around saying, having this view that if I think well, it's okay. If I were them, and I had a guest, and that guest wanted to look at my coffee book on the coffee table. Oh, sure, I would be glad to have him. And so my practice is to sounds a little arrogant, I guess when I look at it carefully, that I just say, Well, if I were them, it would be perfectly fine. So why should I not do it? But I think there are some, obviously assumptions going on there that not everyone thinks the way I do and has the values I have, etc, etc. So I find myself when I look carefully, being somewhat arrogant, in that way.

Well, thank you for telling us. No, I mean, me. I appreciate that. made. It's quite so it's quite quite nice to see oneself, see what's going on and recognize something and be able to say it no matter of fact, way If that's the case, it speaks well for you. And so one of the things that occurs to me is that if we do have beliefs like this, you know, that impact other people is you can check it out with them. That's the tilt my belief, because that's true. Okay. Can I you know, if you were in my house, you could go into my cupboards and take any food you want. And so, I'm assuming that's okay with you. Your house so? And they said, huh? Okay, So I hope to see talk this evening as challenged you some. And that was certainly my hope for it to kind of challenge you to look at your relationship to beliefs and to question how you hold them, what's going on with him, why you need them? And what are your beliefs around those beliefs. See if by looking at all that weather, you can find yourself lighter and cooler. Thank you