

2010-05-30 Buddhist Training

Sun, 8/16 8:46AM • 32:42

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

training, buddhism, mind, people, buddhist, cultivate, practice, housecleaning, train, repetition, ways, inclines, shaped, limit, learning, holding, mindfulness, understanding, kinds, meditation

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

This morning, I want to talk about training in Buddhism, all schools of Buddhism. Almost all schools of Buddhism, put a big emphasis on training. It's such a big emphasis in Buddhism that there was a high school student who came to the monastery. And he's supposed to do a report. So he thought he had an interview with the Abbess and so he asked if he could interview her but his report and she said, Yes. So we sat down with a piece of paper and he said, What is it you believe in here at the monastery? And, and she said, You're not going to learn much about the monastery without question. A better question is to ask, what do we train it? Where do we train it here? And his story reminds me of Something brother David Stendhal Ross said many years ago, he's a Catholic monk, who spent some time Tassajara practicing with the Zen people there been a lot of time around visiting Zen center over the years as well. And he said that he feels he has more in common with Buddhist monastics than he does with ordinary lay Christians. And I think what he was why he says that is because they both have a form of training, which is comparable, very similar. They and so some of the ways in which you're changed or changed is very similar. For people who don't have a practice to have a training. They might have all kinds of beliefs, but it doesn't get embodied doesn't enter into their how they behave. It doesn't kind of change who they are. And monastic life or Buddhist life really focuses on transformation of changing who we are To the training as part of that. What? So then this high school student asked the Abbess Well, can you tell me something about training here in the monastery? And she started off by saying, well, there's there's generally two views, two ways of understanding what training is about and Buddhism. And one way of understanding it is that it's like, if you live in the Mojave Desert, or Salt Lake City or someplace, and you've never been to the Pacific, then you might train to do that long walk in and make yourself strong enough so you can do a long walk and you practice getting to the Pacific. That's one way of training. The other one way of understanding is training is like, learning how to swim. When you're standing in the ocean. You're already in the Pacific. Are you standing in the water to your ankles, and then you're going to learn to swim. And it's not a matter of getting to the ocean from, you're already there. The goal is the ocean. And so one way of training in Buddhism is that we train in the context that we're already in the truth. We're already somehow home. We're already in Zen. They talked about we're already perfect just the way we are. We train here in this reality here. Remember, Suzuki, Roshi Zen teacher who, who, in his books in my beginner's mind, who puts a big emphasis and said, Yeah, we're perfect. Just things are perfect just the way they are. At the same time, he talks about how do you practice with tragedy? He talks about in the book, I think in the book he talks about, you know, if a parent loses a child or young child or child any child, well, how do you sit with that? How do you practice with that and You know, he lost his wife, his wife was murdered in his temple. So he knew about sitting in tragedy. And, and he talked about how important it is to just sit. Because if you sit for him training or sitting fully after a while the sitting, the sense of presence, the immediacy, the fullness of this reality right here takes precedence over the intellectual ideas and memories and stories, concepts, fears that we have. And it changes the context of how we relate to what's happening. So do we sit? Do

we retrain, already feeling connected or retrain in order to get to the ocean. And so those are two different ways and both ways are quite fine to have. And you don't maybe don't get to choose which one you which one you get. Different people for whatever reason, have different backgrounds that bring them to different understandings of what they're doing when they're doing Buddhist Practice.

So one way or other training is really important in Buddhism. And it partly is, arises out of an understanding, which is, I think, an ordinary understanding. But sometimes when you put it in religious terms, it seems kind of lofty or challenging. And understanding that the human mind can be trained. And we know that because we train children, we train them to learn the ABCs. And we train them to learn to read. We train them how to play musical instruments, we train them many ways. And a lot of that training comes from repetition. I had no idea that I'd be reciting ABC sing that song as many times as I have in the last year since I was having kids over and over and over again. And so I don't know if I was 20. I'm pretty drained out but my kids are as well. And so anybody who learns it learns a new language, for example, is training. Learning a musical instrument is training training is shaping the mind, learning a skill, learning a craft, and learning a sport. And generally, when we're training for those kinds of ordinary things, we don't expect to be succeed the first time we try. But it's called training because we do it repetitively, over and over and over again, oftentimes, something very simple or simple, that we have to master and we do it over and over again, until they kind of enters in deeply into our, you know, the nervous system into our muscles and becomes kind of almost second nature. I remember growing up, we used to go skiing sometimes when I was a kid, and I was amazed at the memory from this end of one winter to the beginning of the next winter, somehow the internal memory of Remember how to do it. And then I didn't ski for my whole most of my adult life until, until I was I don't know, I spent ski try it again when I was about 45. And so I hadn't skied for 30 years. And I was really surprised the memory was still there, you know, somehow I'd been shaped and then those synaptic routes, knew their way from that repetition, over and over again. And so the mind can be shaped and our synaptic pathways can be shaped, our muscles can be shaped and trade. And so Buddhism takes this truth and, and says, you can you can shape your mind you can shape yourself in such a way that you have a mind which is much freer, much happier, much more fluid with the world around you. And so Buddhism understands and partly the kind of background for Buddhism is that Buddhism understands the mind Not to be a thing, it's not the brain, the mind is a process within the brain. And it's a series of processes. And processes are fluid, unless they're frozen. And as we get older, sometimes not necessarily older, but some people get frozen, locked in certain ways of thinking certain ways of understanding certain ways of behaving, certain ways of seeing and perceiving, and becomes very deeply ingrained habits that it's very hard to break out of. And, and so it's very hard to kind of and, and so we talked about being frozen, and part of the function of Buddhist training is to help to unfreeze the ways in which we're stuck in particular mental patterns. The mind is more like a water than wood. So isn't it so it's water, sometimes the water freezes and then you have a thought, sometimes our mind has to be thawed and it takes a while, but, but our mind is also like water and they'll take any they'll take this Shape of any container you put it in, it's easily influenceable. Just like you can, you could, you know, a wind blows across the lake, it pushes the water, the water creates little waves and you know, or current comes along or whatever and of the water can be shaped and move, you can splash in the water. So the same thing with the mind, the mind is very influenceable. And we see that, particularly with children, the very we say they're very impressionable. And they can take they can be impressed by all kinds of influences that come along their way. But so can we as adults, and it's quite, I think, humbling to realize how much we can be influenced by our other people, by the environment, by our culture, our society, and people's views about things can change slowly over time. The story that I kind of remember well is in the early 90s, I had this very old Toyota that I lived with I I live, I live with we were close.

And, and the early 90s. I live in San Francisco and I was very happy content with my Toyota. And, and then, at some point I moved down here to the peninsula. And I started which is our group used to be in Palo Alto was going to school Stanford, nice to drive my, my beautiful red Toyota around Palo Alto. And at some point, I noticed I started having these thoughts. That, you know, having a new car would be good. And I was being influenced by the fact that they were I had like the oldest car and Palo Alto. It was kind of like beat up and slow. And I knew there was one person who was embarrassed that their spiritual teacher had this car And so I could see that, you know, we've kind of just slowly drifting my mind, because now I was in different, different kind of community with different kind of situation different cars than what I was used to in San Francisco. And it was pushing my mind to start thinking on new car thoughts. You know, wouldn't it be nice, and I didn't mean new car, but you know, I could see it moving that direction. So I suspect that some of you can be influenced that way as well. And some of that's invisible, as when we watch and, you know, popular media that kind of inundates us with lots of impressions they want to impress on us. And in fact, if we don't take responsibility for how our mind is shaped, there's plenty of people who want to do it for you. And, and part of Buddhist training is to take the ordinary the fact that the mind is impressionable as shapeable is trainable and take some responsibility for it because you If you don't, your mind can be trained regardless. That's the nature of the mind if it gets trained, the Buddha said, Whatever is thought and pondered upon frequently becomes the inclination of the mind. inclination, that's where the mind goes. So if you're thinking a lot about, you know, greedy things, greed, or lusty things, then the mind inclines more and more in that direction. If you think more about wisdom, about generosity about love, the mind inclines towards that more. If you if you think more about peace, practice letting go the mining clients towards that. If you incline the mind to think about what you want to hold on to and grasp or resist, the mind inclines towards that. So Buddha's training is take responsibility for this aspect of the mind and to train it to take some direction, it doesn't have to be dramatic. Some people get a little bit resistant to the idea of trading the mind because it sounds exhausting, they're already exhausted. And every time they could do even more, one of the ways we train the mind is the creative mind to do less. We trade it to rest, to relax. And some people that's what the primary training they need to do when they first come to Buddhism is to thaw out to chill out to relax, to settle. And that's a real big challenge to do that for some people. So what I like to do is to offer a variety of functions of training different aspects of trading. One of the functions of training is to help us to meet ourselves, to see ourselves more clearly. And it's the principle that sometimes only if you limit yourself, can you really see what goes On with you. If you have unfettered freedom to do whatever you want, you might not see how much you're driven by your desires. And but when your desires can't be fulfilled only then do you see Wow, I didn't realize how compulsively driven I was by these desires that I have. And so is there so as a part of Buddhist training classically has been to put yourself in a situation that limits you. Not because you're supposed to be limited, but so you can discover the unlimited mind by seeing how you already you're limiting yourself by the particular ways that you are stuck. So

you know, if say you have a credit card that has no limit, you know, infinite bank account, then you could go out and you know, you can shop to your drop, you can just shop away freely and buy whatever you want is very nice buy, buy buy, and it just seems It was nice to you know, it just fell in You know, you could say to a friend of mine is nice, you know, I could take it or leave it as is, you know, just easy thing to do. And then you you know, your bank account goes dry and you try to you know, use a credit card and they won't take it and then you realize what how addicted you were to buy. You had no idea there was just you know, all the all the things that buying meant you didn't realize that by not buying things meant security, admin comfort admin status, it meant identity, it meant, you know, holding on to your friends because you can show off your bio to them, but then it's whatever, and you had no idea. So by limiting yourself to not being able to buy, you see all the momentum, they might be invisible if you acted out freely. That makes some sense, I'm saying. So, you know, when you're in meditation, for

example, you limit yourself by choice, I hope You, you decide to sit down, close your eyes and not move for a period of time. For some people, especially when you're new to us, that can be very hard. There are all these can be strong compulsions, to move to do something, that could be a strong compulsion to go and eat, or go and check the email or go and defrost the freezer. Or there could be strong movements to to move, you know, to to scratch an itch or to make yourself more comfortable. And by having some reasonable commitment not to move, you're limiting you're limiting yourself. And then that limitation you're you get, you know, these strong impulses compulsions, beliefs, desires, aversions get highlighted get seen more clearly. And in that process, you see yourself in a much deeper, fuller way than you would if you had greater freedom to do whatever you want. So some people might hear This is a big surprise because Buddhism emphasizes freedom. And that was the good news, right? I'm coming to you free. But the way to be free is not to be able to do whatever you want, but to become free of what you want, be free of desire. And then you can do much more than you can be much more free in the world. Freedom from desire, rather than freedom to act on all desires. So, part of trading is to limit yourself. And so meditation can do that. spending time on retreat can do that. Where you know, your life becomes very, very radically reduced on retreat, meditation retreats, where, you know, there is no television media computers, there is no telephones, there's very little social talking or almost no social talking going on. Maybe you get less sleep than usual. Maybe there's a schedule which is not your choosing. And so you have to follow the schedule. That is you know, not your choosing and And food, they serve you food, which is not your choosing. And so you have to kind of contend with that, unfortunately, the food is very good usually. And now you know, it'd be much better training if was lousy food. And so that's part of the function of trading is to help us see ourselves meet ourselves. And it's, it's a really powerful and significant thing to really meet yourself in a really deep way. That is kind of limit limit limiting part of trading can do. And then a second part function of training, which builds on that is part of training is to do house cleaning. So once we meet ourselves and see ourselves, they start cleaning house and realizing that perhaps you have unresolved issues in your life that needs to be cleaned up. Perhaps you need to go apologize to someone or make amends for something. Perhaps you need to finish something you promised you would do but never did. There's all kinds of things that can bubble up when you sit down and in and see yourself like you do in meditation. And sometimes that requires some some in the world housecleaning, but there might require some in in the mind housecleaning in the heart house cleaning, perhaps are things we realized we have to let go of, we have to understand more deeply. We have to kind of change our values a little bit, you know, it doesn't make sense anymore to live along those values. So I have to kind of figure out a different way of living. So once we meet ourselves, we can do the housecleaning and part of the function of training is to start having a time and the inclination to do that housecleaning has to happen.

Another aspect of training in Buddhism is what's called cultivation.

This is the

you know, there's no real good Buddhist word ancient Buddhist word for our word meditation. And comes as a big surprise. It's Buddhism associated with meditation so much. The word that that kind of is comparable in Buddhism is the word Bhavana, which means cultivation or development. And meditation is one part of a trainings of cultivating the mind in the heart. And I like the word cultivating a lot because I liken it to a farmer who's good at cultivating a field, tending nurturing something, patiently allowing things to grow. And periodically in history, Buddhism, teachers that emphasize that practices like tending, like being a farmer, slow and patient, you plant a seed, you water it, you keep tending it, pull it pull ups, pull away the weeds, and you let the plant grow in its own way. You can't rush the plant. You can't pull the corn seed out the corn seedling out of the ground in order to encourage it. To grow better, you know, you store the corn corn seedling. And so you have to kind of be very patient and slow.

And the gradual approach to practice is one that this cultivation is one that's the hallmark of much of Buddhism. From right down from the time of the Buddha to, to Zen to Suzuki, he emphasized also that training is slow and gradual. So there's many things that are cultivated. There you cultivate capacity, you cultivate a capacity to be more at ease to be relaxed. If that's what's needed, you cultivate greater capacity for mindfulness to be present, cultivate a greater capacity for concentration and be focused, cultivate a greater capacity, to love, to be loving, to have kindness, to have compassion. You don't leave things like love to chance, but you can spend time actually cultivating, developing that capacity, not as anything artificial, but something that can block in its own natural way, from the heart. We cultivate our capacity to be ethical. We cultivate our capacity to be generous to become more, have more generosity. And a lot of these training, forms of training come from actually doing the activity we're trying to train ourselves to be. So we become more generous by being generous. We become more loving by starting to love we become more mindful, but by being mindful. So mindfulness is at the heart of this. And, and, and I'd like to quote Ralph Waldo Emerson. If you really think of mindfulness as being maybe synonymous to watching, Emerson said, watch your thoughts. They become words. Watch your words. They become deeds. Watch your deeds, they become habits, watch your habits, they become character. And character is everything into the quote. So, you know starts with a word starts with a thought built in. So part of the mindfulness is to start tracking, not just our behavior, but down at the very root, where it all begins with a thought. And then and so part of the training is to begin training ourselves to have the proper understanding healthy understanding about you know what to think about, to take responsibility, not just for our behavior and our beliefs, the responsibility for what the mind actually thinks, moment by moment. Think that which is useful and productive. So

So a big part of Buddhist training has to do with this cultivation aspect. It's it's slow, it takes a lot of repetition. You know, I probably, you know, I'd be curious to know what the count is for how many times how many breaths I've watched. You know, I've been following my breath now since I was 20. You know, so it's been 36 years, every day, pretty much every day, meditating, following my breath, being with my breath. I guess I could do the calculation. I can probably kind of give, you know, some order some order of magnitude. It's a lot a lot of repetition. If when I was 20, someone said you know, you were gonna walk you're going to, you're going to attend 200 and 20 million Breath, I would have gotten bored, or I would have wouldn't have believed them or something. But that repetition coming back over and over and over again, brings a lot of benefit. It's a limitation. So we get to see what's going on more clearly. It's a training, training and mindfulness concentration. It's a training and letting go. It's a kind of housecleaning, and we kind of helps us to empty out all the extra stuff. I find focusing on the breath is a great way of leaving myself alone. I have I have a great capacity of not leaving myself alone, trying to fix things or judge things or run away from things or avoid things and all kinds of wonderful mechanism, machinations of the mind. And so when I sit down and stay with my breath, then all those kinds of kind of ways in which I try to interfere with my life, kind of fall away, and I can just meet me more simply and really see what's here and be with myself and a deeper, more intimate and better official way. So repetition over and over and over again, the virtue of repetition. And then the last thing I want to say about training today is is really important aspect of Buddhist training. The Buddhist training is training is really important to people get inspired by it, it's very meaningful to people, people will throw themselves into it, some people will find great benefit from it and grow grow in the process of doing it. And, and so it's all wonderful. And now, the last this last really important aspect of Buddhist training is to really use it one of the functions of it has to be one of the functions of it. So he has listened carefully, is one of the functions of doing Buddhist trainings so you can fail at it. So you can fail at it. We think of that sooner or later you're going to fail at it. And it's not going to go the way you want, you're not gonna, you're not going to, you know, go as far as you want, or you're not going to succeed, like going to work. And that as some people say, that's when practice really begins. That's when the training really begins. It's not a failure that you failed. Then you get to look at yourself, you get to meet yourself and understand

yourself much better. Like, for example, some people hold on to Buddhist practice, as a as a lifesaver. They just cling to it so tightly, and they have to look, you know, what's needed is to let go of the grip. It doesn't work to cling to it. Some people have a strong identification to Buddhist practice, as if they're going to be a better you know, they're still just, you know, you know, they're going to be able to the best person on their block. They get there, wherever As the Buddhist badge and so if they succeed in, in be in doing Buddhist training, then they know that they're successful. They know they've been a good person, you know, I've, I've, you know, I'm doing all this Buddhist practice for a while, and, and my parents don't approve of it, or my kids don't approve it. And, you know, they tell me, I'm going to be a loser. And I have to prove them wrong, I have to show them have great success and get a PhD in Buddhism or something. And, you know, just so that, you know, you can kind of really, you know, and so when you fail, then you get to look at all the kind of extra all those unfortunate ways in which people relate to it. All the unfortunate ways which relate to ourselves,

all the attachments, the clinging, the fears connected to it. And perhaps at some point, what's important is not the further growth in Greater mindfulness, greater concentration, rather, is the radical letting go. Of all the things we're holding on to, including success and all the things that success means. Some people, so called succeed for a long time in practice, and then they fail. Some people fail right away. And I don't know which is better. But only, it only works if you don't give up because of it. You can only you can in the training, the failing and training only works if you continue the training with a failure. If you hang in and carry on with it, and realize this is a very important part of the practice if we're not to work. And then turn around and look and look at what your beliefs with your attachments with your clinging are what's going on there and see and ask yourself, Is there something important I need to let go of here? that'll let go of the training, but let go of how I hold it, how I think about it, so that I can find a more peaceful, more productive, more useful way of holding and being present for it. Maybe not so greedy, or not so desperately or not. So it's not tying into my self identity. That my worth worth wildness as a human being is going to only happen when I succeed in practice. Only when, you know, so. So I hope you all have really good failures at this as well. I hope you have good success. Hope to succeed really well in your training. I hope that the training, the Buddhist training helps you to meet yourself, rather than take you away from yourself because if it takes you away from yourself, then you'll fail sooner. And because really Buddhism is about really in some ways to leave yourself alone to meet yourself and find out how to Be really at peace here with who you are. And I like to think that Buddhist training is very respectful of each person's uniqueness. You're not supposed to be end up like a cookie cutter Buddhist. And, and, but to really meet yourself, respect yourself, and then begin to take responsibility for what you see there and begin being having more choice about how you're going to shape this heart, beautiful heart and mind that we have that you have and cultivate and develop the qualities which you'd like to have that want to live in this leg width. And then and then find some value meaning in failing at it, because as you fail at it, then you can let go more deeply. This is especially true at the upper ends of practice when practice gets really deep. some point you see you see the limitations of the very practice itself and you realize it In the practice, what you're holding on to, has to be let go of. And in the end, in the very end, at least, you have to let go completely let go of the training itself while still training. So I hope that so I hope that makes some sense to you today. I hope that it inspires you to train and if you can train as if you're already in the ocean, that's great. And if you're still getting to the ocean, that's great, too. In the ocean of truth, thank you.