

2010-12-13 Being A Light Unto Yourself

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SPEAKERS

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There's a famous teaching that the Buddha gave in the last months of his life where he says, Be a light unto yourself. And as a very evocative statement via light on to yourself. It happens that the word for light in Pali is deipa, d.e.i.p.a. And it could also mean Island be an island unto yourself. And both words are kind of evocative. I like the word light. Be your own light. And I think that in part, what this practice we're doing here is to discover how to be a light unto ourselves to kind of turn on the light. And so that we have the light. What happens when you have light is you can see when you're in the dark You can't see. And so the task of mindfulness is to be able to see clearly. And to somehow extinguish the darkness that we somehow live in, we don't see properly and then, with a light, see properly what's going on here. And sometimes the light or light, dawn's slowly, slowly, slowly gets lighter. And sometimes it's like turning on a light and darkness vanishes immediately. Being a light on to yourself, means that we don't look externally for a light or externally for a refuge, like something external which is going to be our Savior. But really, we find something in ourselves in our own hearts. I think the contemplative life this mindfulness life is a beautiful process of discovering something quite beautiful that we all have a capacity for awareness for seeing clearly. And so to be a light on to yourself, so this teaching where the Buddha gave this is an interesting kind of passage. And I thought I would read it to you and talk about a little bit. And so again, so the Buddha was just near end of his life. He's an old man. He's about 80, 81 years old. And my kind of assumption not having been there is that when you were at, in the year 500 BC, you were a lot older than you are when you're at nowadays. You know, they didn't have a lot of the same kind of care that they have these days. And illnesses come in and there's, you know, you didn't have palliative care when you were dying, you know, here had pain, there's no real pain medication. And so it was probably, you know, fairly challenging to be an old man. And you hear some of this in the story for the Buddha. So the Buddha was what was called the rains retreat. The last rains of his life last for three months, we stays put in one place. And, and, and during the rains, the Buddha was attacked by a severe sickness with sharp pains as if he were about to die. So that's not you know, you know, it's, you know, maybe it was havior graph, maybe they were kind of building it up, saying he was much, much more painful than it really was. But I think it's unlikely. You know, illnesses can hurt a lot if you don't have pain medication. It's pretty bad, sharp pains as if he were about to die. But he endured all this mindfully, clearly aware and without complaining. He thought, it is not fitting that I should die without addressing my followers and taking leave of the order of monks. I must hold this disease in check by energy and apply myself to the force of life. He did so and the disease abated. So here is a man old man 80 years old men, tremendous pain is sick, seemingly at the edge of death. And he makes this resolution this resolve to somehow rally his forces to stay alive for a little bit longer. So he can kind of make his final addressing kind of final have a final instructions or addresses is students that one last time

Then, having recovered from a sickness, as soon as he felt better, he went outside, sat on a prepared seat in front of his dwelling. Then the Venerable Ananda came to him, saluted him, sat down to one side and said, Lord, I've seen the Buddha in comfort. And I've seen the Buddha patient. The I've seen the, the Buddhist patient enduring. And my body was like a drunkards, I lost my bearings and things were unclear to me, because of the Buddhist sickness. The only thing that it was of some comfort to me was the thought, the Buddha will not die until he has made some statement about the order of monks. So Ananda was for 20 years and under was his kind of right hand attendant, traveled around with him, knew him very well very close to actually because it's also and now but at nunda wasn't was nothing likened. And even though he spent so much time with the Buddha. So here he describes himself being quite distressed at the prospect of his teacher dying. And the his body was like a drunkard. I lost my bearings. And the Buddha replied, but a Nanda, what does the order of monks expect of me? I have taught the Dharma and under making no inner or outer distinction in teachings, no hidden distinction between what's hidden and exposed. What it means means that he's set it all he has had no hidden teachings, no last hidden teachings, like Now finally, he's about to dice finally, to give you the, you know, the universe, everybody's waiting for the secret, right? And so he's no secrets. I just say it's always been I've explained it all. I've set it up. All right public, it's up front. It's not esoteric, that a hidden teaching. The Buddha has no teachers fist, in respect to doctrines. Teacher fist mean you hide the teachings in the fist, you don't really show everything. So they again the idea in Buddhism the Buddha taught with an open hand. And this idea of an open hand the teachings, teachings and practices are offered freely and openly to everyone, anybody who wants it, and it's just there for people to people to use. But the trick is, it's there for people to use. It's up to you to use them, not the Buddha, what is that gonna use it for you? He can just, you know, have this open hand with the teachings. And then they would have continued if there's anyone who thinks I shall take charge of the order. So he's dying, right? So he's to say to anybody thinks I should take charge of the order or the order should refer to me Let him make some statement like that if he wants, but that the target of the Buddha, me does not think in in such terms. So here he's saying he doesn't think of himself as the leader, who is the person in charge of this community of people that needed a quite a quite a statement to make the end of his life. He was in many ways the leader of the community, and he set the rules for it all. But here as he's dying, he's not he's not claiming that he's offering his he's the leader who's in charge anymore. And in fact, he refused to appoint a successor. That that, you know, again, this idea you're not looking externally to somebody who's going to be your leader, because you're supposed to be a light unto yourself. So then, Ananda, said the Buddha, I am now old, worn out one who has traversed life's paths. I've reached the end of life, I reached the term of life, which is ad, just as an old cart is made to go by being held together by straps. So the target does body is kept going by being strapped up. It's only when the Agata the Buddha withdraws his attention from outward signs, and by the cessation of certain feelings, enters into this concentration that his body knows comfort.

So, you know, none of you are held together by straps yet and that but some of you who are getting older can maybe well imagine that things are not working the way they used to work and limping along and you know, your teeth are not the same as they used to be and your eyesight is not. My wife who is in her late 40s is quite surprised by what's happening with her eyes. And she's struggling to figure out the secret The cloud Do you wear the glasses? And where are they and when to use them when not to use them? They didn't have glasses back then. But they didn't read either. So there's an old cart held together by straps that's quite as good as describing his own experience. You know, we have usually we, you know, religions like to to pick their founders in glorious terms. And, you know, we so we'd kind of do it here we have this beautiful statue of the Buddha here isn't, you know, you know, it's probably he's in his 30s, upright, noble, healthy and everything. And, you know, you don't that often you should take the Buddha as it's all bent over a guy with held together by straps, you know, limping along, barely alive, sick. He describes himself when the suit dose is being bent over all wrinkled. Isn't that great? And

in case you thought that if you could only get enlightened men you can live in wonderful enlightened retirement. And you wouldn't even you know, need a facelift. Because everything will be taken care of, but to know even when you're enlightened, the body takes its course the body unfolds, it gets sick and old and, and the struggle so that then, and again, I'm repeating myself, but I'm kind of touched by the idea that they didn't have all the medical care and support that people hear at least in California, so many people here, not everyone can avail themselves over get. So it's only when he goes gets into deep meditation concentration, that he gets some relief from his pains and his difficulties. And that's, I think, something really special that if you've cultivated your meditation To practice when you have a chance, it can perhaps become a refuge at a time when it's really needed. And it can help you deal with pain deal with all kinds of problems that might arise. And there's no guarantee that medicine is going to have help for you. No, no guarantee that there's going to be palliative care for you. Therefore, then it's funny because it says so he talks about how he's old and just through meditation, can he get some relief from his pain. Therefore, the Buddha continued, you should live like you should live as lights on to yourselves. being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge with the Dharma as a refuge, as a light with the Dharma as your refuge with no other refuge. So yourself as your own refugee Sometimes in tera, vaada Buddhism, we talk a lot of times we talk about the three refuges. And people take refuge in Buddha Dharma Sangha. But there's also a fourth refuge. And remarkably, that refuge is you. And but are you worthy of refuge at this point? Are you really capable of being a finding inside of yourself? a repository of truth and strength and compassion and wisdom that can carry you through great challenges that might come across in your life? Hopefully that's the case. And because it's certainly a potential we all have, the function of the practice, that Buddha taught is a practice that helps make us a refuge. We help find ourselves the strength, the peace, the compassion, the wisdom, so that whatever life brings us, we can we can meet it with some balance with equanimity with peace. So we're not we don't draw This is where the idea of the island instead of the light, be an island onto yourself Island is a place where you're going to you're safe. You know but you guys, you know when it's when there's a flood go to the go to the high high the island and hopefully be safe.

So therefore you should live as lights unto yourselves being your own refuge with no one else as your refuge with the Dharma as a light with the Dharma as your refuge with no other refuge, and how does a person live as a light unto oneself? here and under, a person abides contemplating the body as body earnestly, clearly aware, mindful and having put away all hankerings and fretting for the world. And likewise with regard to feelings, mind and mind objects that are non de is how a person lives as a light unto oneself with no other refuge.

And those who now in my time or afterwards, who lived us, they will attain the highest. If they want to train, if they want to do the training, they work to study. So, here become a lifetime to yourself, and then I'm going to tell you how to do that. And remarkably, he says, The four foundations of mindfulness, which is the core teaching of mindfulness that we do here, mindfulness of your body, to somehow center yourself in your body, and know how to be present for your body in and of itself, to be aware of your feelings and be centered in them in and of themselves. And then your mind states, and what's called here he calls it mind objects or your DOM. The mental processes that go on inside of us to really see clearly. And the expression which can be translated as the body in and of itself, the mind in and of itself means to when to be present for it without the added interpretations and commentary and reactions. That's also common to have. We often have stories, we add things on top of it, we don't just see our body, we see our body, in light of our self image or how we think it should be or what our society tells us how our bodies should be. And there's a whole slew of stories and ideas we make up. It's quite something, to be alive to be present in the face of some real big challenges. The Buddha here challenge of death, to be present and not have a story about what's happening, where it's going, what's next. What's happening tomorrow. And there's something about is very poignant, very powerful about

being present here. And knowing how to be present here, for just this as it is just our immediate experience of body, feelings of mind. And to just feel it in the future, feel the vibrancy of the fullness of it. And the freedom that's possible here and not let the mind tip over into its story making into its imagination, into its judgments into spheres, into its memories of everything, but just here. And this is a fantastic capacity to have, when it's the stories, interpretations and ideas we make that get us to suffer get us into trouble. So to be a light under ourselves, To be mindful of, of what's happening in here in the present moment as it's happening in a vivid and clear way. That's where the light is. One of the things you'll see, if you have that kind of presence, you'll see the mind beginning to make stories. interpretations. See the mind producing fear, or aversion. And to see it occurring in the present moment, and not falling into it, not being swept up into the into it, but just to see it stay present to be mindful of it is a place of freedom. So, you know, it's, it's, you know, you see the projections into the future, you see the holding on to the past beginning to happen, and you stay present here. And that presence, clearly seeing the arising of something and the passing away of it clearly seeing ourselves being present and aware of it. sometimes described as turning on the light and keeping the light on. When we, when we tip over and fall into the story making mind, the judging mind, the past and the future ideas we have the imagination. Some people report that is kind of like things get dark and darkening or closing down a constriction that happens when you come back to being mindful and awake, it's like the light goes on. Again, there's this clarity or there's openness or translucency that can happen in the mind. And there's there is possibility or freedom. So to be a light onto yourself, be a refuge onto yourself is one of the great powerful pointers or teachers of this teachings of this tradition that we're in.

And it's not meant to be a selfish teaching or self centered Teaching to be a light on to yourself. It isn't that you're like the, you know the best around. But rather, it's the opposite. Because the very movement to be self centered or selfish with this focus on being a light on yourself, that itself is a darkening. That itself involves suffering and narrowing, its tipping over and falling into one of the stories we make up. And if we can keep the light on it, you can't you can't be selfish. You'll be open and you'll see and in the light. It's my confidence in my experience and my confidence that it when your life is turned on, when you're awake and present, the very best qualities of who you are, whatever your good qualities might be, have a chance to shine forth. So I'll end with the analogy that I like of the greenhouse analogy. If a greenhouse has curtains, and you click it covers the glass, so no light comes in, and it's kind of hot and humid in there and dark, all the mold grows and it just kind of gets really disgusting. But if you pull the curtains and let the light come in, then that disgusting slime and stuff dries out and the plants that are in there, the beautiful plants to orchards or orchids or whatever, they can grow and bloom so when our curtains are drawn and we live in the dark, then our slime our greed or hate our version or fear can start kind of, you know, fermenting or something. And then, but turn on the light and then the flowers can grow so let your flowers grow. So those are my thoughts today. And I think we have about 20 minutes, 15 minutes, if any of you would like to ask any questions or make some comments, or talk about something right behind us and like

I read today and I've been it's sort of represents what you said about the greenhouse is that I think of myself as a circle. And if people look at me, they see a circle and we rarely see a hole in the wall. And I think what I've been struggling with is what's inside the circle, which is my own stories, as well as being impacted by the wall. Like like this, the lines of the circle are like your blanket. So I've been sitting struggling with. I mean, I have my own internal triggers where that mold grows. But I also given that I am also really connected to my environment the people in I find myself being blanketed, and I struggled with feeling and trusting that expansive state and not not going into protective mode,

great, beautiful to struggle you struggle with that it's good that you know, when you're struggling, one of the great things I think, is not succeeding but is practicing. It's nice to succeed in practice, but it's really significant to have a practice and to know there's a practice and have the strength and the courage to keep doing it even when it's difficult. And in some ways, that's really where the heart and the growth of the practices is in the doing and in the trying and the efforting is hang in there and resolve and take refuge in that And if people keep looking at your mold, just remind yourself that it's just more fodder for your practice to do your best. And, but no, you know, they might see the mold, but no one puts the blankets over your greenhouse except for you. So they might try to bring you they might bring you blankets, lots of blankets, but you're the one that picks them up. So we might look at that a little bit and see when people come to you with projections and ideas. You might look at see what how you react to that. What you do, and, and if you're, if you're getting darker because of something you're doing behind you there.

I was wondering if you could help me better understand how to, I don't wanna say plan for future if you're in whether it's a work relationship or an intimate relationship, planning together and communicating how that's couldn't be different, or is it different than having a story? And

oh, yeah, can you help me understand that? Maybe there's no sharp line between stories and plans. But having having stories is an important part of life, I wouldn't want to have a life with no stories. And it doesn't make sense to have a life without, you know, I mean, if you're, if you know, you're dying, you know, maybe it's not a lot of planning that makes sense anymore. But, but planning is important part of life as well. So how do we do it wisely is the question. And so to understand that we have to understand I think we have to understand what it's like to do it unwisely. So what it's like to get caught in it and lost in it and reactive to it. So we study ourselves to see how our mind works. And we see what it's like to get lost. When you sit down To meditate, for example, can you let go of your concern with planning? Can you let go of the stories you have, because if you can let go of it, then then when you go back when you need to look at it, you can look at it with fresh eyes. But if you met me when you meditate and keeps churning and churning and churning, and probably indicates you're caught by it. So, sitting down with someone you have to talk to and make a plan about the future sounds, it could be a very wise thing to do if and there are times when that's appropriate. And then it helps if you stay present while you do it. The you know, planning about the future only occurs in the present. And so if you're clearly aware of this is what's happening the present and know what you're feeling, know what's going on in your body. And I really present for the process of planning, you're less likely to get in trouble, then if you get lost into the image of the future. So to speak. to you or is that not quite to the point? Anybody confusing

you and ask something else or something related or another way?

Yes, of course.

Plan. When another question. Yes and the gas the mic back to the back of that.

Have you ever thought about how you would explain to someone from a theistic background, how they might be a light unto themselves?

God's done his Park now it's our turn.

It was easy.

You say you satisfied?

Very, very Wow.

Remember the mic on the side?

I I'm relatively new to all this and you said there were four things. You said Buddha, Dharma, something. And

so I think there was one of the things I talked about is there's the refuges is called When we take refuge in or what we kind of things that we turn towards to support us or orient us for finding our, our practice or life. And classically, there's a list of three refuges, sometimes called the three treasures, there the Buddha, which who is the person who kind of discovered this particular practice and path for us. It's also refers to that capacity for us to be Buddha says to be awake. And awakening, Buddha means awakening. And then the Dharma is means the teachings that he taught. But it also means the practices and inner processes that lead to freedom to liberation. So we orient ourselves towards that we use that to support and then and the third is the Sangha, which is community, community of other people who practice with us because we don't do it alone. It's really supportive to have other people and who share what we're doing and help us and support us along the way. In particular, those people who have tastes We've had a witness or has some experience of real freedom, who really know that they're that the real, genuine, deep spiritual freedom is possible. Those of people in particular can be very supportive for us because they know where it's all going. So those are called the three refuges. And then, in our tradition, sometimes we talk say there's a fourth and that's ourselves, take refuge in ourselves. It makes sense.

I wonder if you could speak a little bit more about the, the topic of planning. It's one that I struggle with a lot to be To try to be

present

in the present moment, and also be be a responsible parent for my children and plan, think about their future my future without necessarily being attached to those plans. But it's something that I really struggle with and wonder if you could speak to that a little bit.

I think that some things that we have we do our lives in order to do them responsibly, require planning. We can't just leave things to chance. And we just a conversation I had earlier today was, had to do with like, you know, in your school vacations, you know, we just did Mixing we haven't like coming up, right? It's not gonna work if we don't plan. I mean, it could work, but what's gonna work? Something's gonna work. We'll get through it, I'm sure. But, you know, if we don't have some kind of plan and what these kids are going to do during the vacation you know? I don't think it's gonna be that pretty. So, but I have many things, many things in life require planning, it's responsible life requires some degree of planning. Some people are neurotic planners, because they're motivated by fear or motivated by greed or something. And they kind of caught in the cycles of planning. But how do we plan wisely is and so one of the things that's useful, I think, is to set aside time, that's where you're intentionally going to do so in the mind knows You know, it's Saturday evening, you're going to sit down and you're going to sit down and actually talk and make plans. And if sometimes the mind knows that there's a designated time to do something, then it has the worrying that keeps it going and wondering, you know, should I do it? When should I do it, it keeps you keeps it going, maybe can be put to rest a little bit. And so making time some people can find it useful to plan very conscientiously or carefully go for a walk or journal or something,

just write down ideas and brainstorm and really take it on wholeheartedly, not just casually in something, or talk to a friend, you sit down and actually go back and forth and brainstorm. So it's very intentional and clear, is helpful. And then then the mindfulness practice is to come back and always be mindful of the body. So what's going on in your body when you're planning? You know, you has your body collapsed. You know, this is the heart You know, and you're kind of lay your hands in your, in your head and your, your heads in your lap and Oh, so hard. That's, that's a good information to have to know that that your body's posture has changed. And that the posture you want to plan him, and probably not, you're not much of a refuge for yourself. And that kind of collapsed posture. So, you know, just the ordinary way, sit up straight, and, and then your posture becomes a little bit more support. What are you feeling? What are you, you know, is there a lot of fear going on? And if there's a lot of fear going on, connect to the planning, maybe there's something deeper that needs to be looked at. Maybe it's not the time to make plans. Maybe you need to understand what the fears about and really understand. And then do you have all the information you need to make good plans? And sometimes, it's impossible to get all of it. It's not the nature of life, but sometimes maybe you can do some research or talk to people I know. And so you have more more ideas. I know that for parents, like for me, it's been very helpful to talk to other parents, you know, to realize that learn from what other parents experience. Sometimes I learned that they have the same challenges as we do and oh my kids normal. I thought it was a different species. And so you know, so planning and I have this, you know, budding teen at home and I just talked to him when my oldest friends has a son exactly the same age. And turns out I have easy

what I thought in comparison, but I didn't know so. So I think doing it intentionally and then staying present for the process of planning. And then if there's a lot of unnecessary or difficult feelings, is connected to it, then you have to do some inner work to look and understand that and try to clarify it and freed up

behind you

came in late but just the comment about the lamp. This is saying came to me it's some Hindu master and he said, light your own lamp. No one can give you salvation. Thank you.

So I was thinking of this topic of light for two reasons today. One is because of the time of year. But also, there's a few other reasons. One is that I today I had a meeting with some of the senior Buddhist teachers in the Bay Area and their senior right and beautiful people and but the issues of age and aging and body are as relevant for them as any person who is getting older. And but you could see their light was on. As I talked about, it was quite beautiful and I felt these people these, these many women that I met there are bright lights for the Bay Area, beautiful people, beautiful teachers and I was inspired by their light. And then also because yesterday here at IMC, we had a presentation community meeting to talk about the retreat center that we're going to buy down in Scotts Valley. And at least for me, the, to me that's, you know, a bright light. The idea to have a beautiful light for our community for our society. Retreat Center is a place where we turn on lots of lights. So hopefully we'll have one for all of you. And probably all of your lights are on somewhat But the retreat center will turn on bright. So thank you so much