

2011-03-14 Buddhist Approach To Facing Challenges In Life

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SPEAKERS

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See, I talk some about the earthquake and Aftermath in Japan because I felt I could I talked about anything else. And today I looked at more videos of what happened in Japan and how can I talk about anything else? Today? The videos today were for me were much more graphic than the ones I saw yesterday. I think maybe some of the were home I don't know what's practical, I call them the kind of this more amateur videos that we're done. We're making a way out now to the media we can see some of us probably saw it and it's very moving to see it. And so it's one of those, you know, happens in people's lives. individual life sometimes at some kind of great tragedy befalls them sometimes In a family's life, sometimes in local communities life, but it's not that often we have something that really touches people all over the globe in this kind of massive way. And it's a kind of a kind of very important time for people for the world, for those who choose to, to really look deeply and confront the nature of human existence, what we're here for where it's about what our fundamental orientation is what, you know, what is our role? What is our response? Who are we in this world? I was just a few days ago, I was talking to a friend of mine, who is has a house he's going to retire to on the Big Island in Hawaii, very close to the volcano, I think in the village that she lives called the volcano really generated and she bought a place to live to retire because of her kind of tremendous love for the volcano. And she was very excited because when I saw her the last week or recently it erupted and she said that she wasn't there but you know it's the big event there everybody rushes over to look as close as you can and it was hitting erupted lava was bubbling up higher than usually does, you know, like a spout and I think she just it feels this tremendous all of us. This is a person who also loves to look at these hubs Hubble satellite photographs of deeper deep space. And it's kind of awesome to look deep into the space and to see the great galaxies and planets and all this you know, cosmic scale of things. And you know, it does something to people, I think to kind of case for something was very hard not to somehow place themselves in the midst of it in some way or other. There was a Calvin and Hobbes Hobbes cartoon where Calvin is out at night looking at the great night sky and all the stars and what does he say says something like something like I am important and great confidence yells it out to the stars. And then a little, the next next little picture he's standing kind of looking kind of small, and he says, says the dust knows that says this dust note to the stars. Somehow that kind of oscillations pendulum from thinking is really important to just hardly counts at all. And in the scale of you know, looking deep into space, you know, where all these fiery stars are burning up and collapsing and doing their things Little earthquake is hardly nothing. Or, you know, it's one thing to look at the volcano when you have safe distance. And as another thing to be at Pompei or to be someplace where the lava comes pouring down into your village as it does in places like the Philippines and places and as I was looking at the images today it's kind of awesome to see the power of the water as it washed across the landscape in Japan and tremendous force and energy of it and the scale of what nature is possible to do and how things that

seems so significant or big for us in a human scale. were used to washed away as if they were just toys and you know toys in that Creek and just kind of mean all the events quite quite moving to see these big towns just washed literally we watched them you know kind of believe it you know you watch the water rush through the suburbs or the towns and All the houses collapsing, and being pushed, pushed off, like, you know, like a big bulldozer just kind of wiping them off quite something. And so it's hard to kind of sit there and all the power of nature and Wow, look at that this is this is a planet we're in. Rather, when we see that and see the human side of it, it's more likely to feel horror, or fear or sadness or something, the human capacity for empathy and to put ourselves in other people's shoes or see ourselves in them or somehow resonate with what's going on with them. And, you know, it was kind of heart rending to kind of see what was happening there and, and, you know, many things touched me deeply, but one of the things that touched me was there, I guess the, the video is videoing this, the water rushing through destroying Old Town and the video if people were up on a hill so they could look down safely. So it's mostly looking at the Water at some point, he panned over to the side of the road up in the hill. And there were some people across the road kind of away from not looking at it. And there was a five or six year old girl who was in hysterics. And some grownups are trying to comfort her. And, you know, what is it to look five or six year old and see your see, you know, that all washed away? I know, I've talked to people who have had nightmares now at night after seeing some of these images in Japan. And then it's kind of amazing that it wasn't just way over there. But some, you know, you know, that tsunami came all the way here to California. And today I saw saw maybe some of you saw that the video of the water going through Santa Cruz harbor and a much smaller scale, but it's kind of dramatic to see the piers kind of just buckling up and popping up and it's quite something. So what is it To sit and look at this, what is it to be present for it? What's the response? In situations like this people often come to their religion and say, What does your religion have to say about that? And sometimes people question their religious belief. Think about that. I can't, that's not relevant. Now. That's not helpful. That doesn't really, you know, it's fine to help. You know, mindfulness stuff is fine if it helps me kind of stress reduction a little bit. But you know, what does have to do about the deep existential issues of life? You know, how to respond to the big this these kinds of stuff? How does it make a difference in the world? Or how does it give us hope in a world where it seems like this can happen anytime? I'm regularly reminded how close we are to center Andreas fault. As I said yesterday, number of years we rented an auditorium in Portola Valley for a Sunday morning sittings that used to be a school, but they close it at a school when they really They built, they built a school on top of the San Andreas Fault. So we had our sittings there and turns out with a fault. And so when does that go? And, you know, I kind of expect it to go, I think it's, in some ways better to expect them to say no, can't happen. Everything's safe. We're safe. I grew up. Much of my growing up was in Europe, and had a big impact on me. I was born in 1954, nine years after World War Two, but as I grew up in Europe, the stories and the leftover of this amazing war was still very much in the air very much present. And the Vietnam War and all this stuff. So what is Buddhism have to say about it? How does it support us? What does it mean for us? What is it what does it teach us? And I think For me that one of the most important things about Buddhism is not that it gives us a teaching to explain it to gives us some understanding Oh, just it's like this, let me tell you how it is like this, you know, and then oh, that's how the world is. That's why these things can happen or whatever. And then now I can now and that now I know thank God now we can come back to television. Now I don't have to deal now I don't have to deal with it. Now I understand. Now I don't have to change my life any because Heaven forbid that you change your life. As I said yesterday, also, there's a scholarly book on Christianity in the West. Medic applies to all religions just happens to be of Christianity.

And he talks about how in America that there are two ways that churches teach their religion to general approach or generally remember this think of relevant Buddhist as well as anybody this kind of thing. One is religious messages which are comforting. And the other is religious messages which are

challenging. So what would you rather have? Would you rather have your religion be comforting or challenging? Well, for me, I get comforted when it's challenged. I would rather I would be challenging. So one of the things that Buddhism offers is not so much a teaching that explains it all get you can get that from Buddhism. But rather, it offers a train you teach people to have the capacity to be present for these things, so we can be the witnesses and be present. And so something deep can happen from within us as a response to what goes on in the world. And so to teach us how to be present is a beautiful and wonderful thing. Because it's very easy to turn away. It's very easy to avoid, it's very easy to ignore. It's very easy, easy to get lost in our anxiety and our horror horror. It's very easy to get reactive and all kinds of ways to feel distress To be to sink in the face of it or be discouraged or give up or numb out or there's so many different possible reactions we have denial. And the mindfulness, the practice of training a Buddhism is to teach us all the ways in which we try to avoid being present for what it is. So that we can then learn to be present in a way that we don't get pushed around by it, learn to be present such a way that we don't get caught up in our reactivity. We don't fear doesn't get the upper hand, hate doesn't get the upper hand, our greed doesn't get the upper hand. Our these things can happen, but we have we're stronger than them. We have a capacity to be present. And so Buddhism offers us training, which is not an easy training. It's meant to be meant to be challenging, but just happens to be challenging because we're humans. That is challenging to really do this, to train ourselves so we can really meet The tremendous existential issues of human life, that sooner or later are going to be fall, all of us. And I would say that Buddhism was designed to help humans deal with this level of tragedy, this level of what life is about. There's a lot of joy in Buddhism. There's a lot of emphasis on peace and wonderful feelings and all that. Certainly, but not at the expense of ignoring or denying or not facing this life that we live. So we have this thing in Japan. And so how do we how what happens to us how do we react? What gets the upper hand? What what? You know what happens to you? When you see it? Do you get frightened and then you get lost in the fear? Do you get distressed? Do you get anxious? Do you get horrified you get Is it too much and you shut down and have nightmares? Do you get angry? Some people's response is, in some ways misplaced anger mean anger. So rather than it's so difficult, so painful, that being angry is better. So now you know, maybe we can you angry the people who built the nuclear power stations, because that's, you know, a whole that's one way of reacting. And so the simple act that we do, when we sit down to meditate is a radical act because we're sitting down to be present for what is and in the course of a day of course of a life. All kinds of things come through that simple act of sitting, and we learn to stay, keep our seat and be present, and discover and see deeply what goes on. I believe that then the myth of the Buddha, leaving the palace, and kind of the, one of the primary myths of Buddhism isn't the Buddha was Raised in a very protected environment of a palace, his father's parents protected him from seeing what was really like in the world. He had all the comforts and pleasures of life, but saw none of the difficulties of life. And then when he was the tender age of 26, he finally left the walls of the palace, and was shot was shocked to see that there's old age, sickness and death, which is kind of shorthand for seeing, you know, the full extent of what this life can bring us, the tsunami of life.

And so in this myth, what's it what I think what for me, one of the things that's meaningful is that when he saw that he saw this life, he didn't then retreat back to his palace in retreat back to his suburban life and ignore the world. Back to his comfort. He didn't retreat and ignored, rather, he entered into the world to face it and some people To say, Well, he left everything behind to become a monk. But you know, if you're going to enter the world to face existential issues in ancient in ancient India, it wasn't like there was a welfare to help you out or footsteps, you know, you had to, you know, there was, you know, very little options if you really face it and deal with and look at it. And the avenue that was available, the time was to be a renunciant. But I like to think that, you know, he actually entered into it to face it, and deal with it. And I hope that that's what Buddhism is encouraging everyone to do is to turn towards their difficulties, turn towards what's hard and difficult, and face it and learn from it and heal through it or find

what's possible through it. So the first task, I think, is Buddhism. what it has to offer is it offers a whole to develop our capacity to be present. And then we have these kinds of events like in Japan, hopefully then you have the capacity to stay present for it. I know There are some people who've turned the television off, they can't handle it. And so there's just too much I can't do it, deal with it, which I can respect that. It's important to take care for oneself. And that's one way. But I hope that we training, training people here at IMC, to who, who turn off the TV when it's a soap operas. But turn on the TV, when it's a matter of seeing this life that we have and really facing it and taking it in. And, and so a capacity to see. So that's one thing, but then what happens when we see what happens when we feel we have the empathy, what happens to what goes on? And one of the questions that I think some people ask, is, am I you know, am I obligated to respond? I want a religion that teaches me thou shalt be of service you should you know, this is what you should do. And one of the amazing things about Buddhism as far as I can tell, is that Buddhism or obligates no one to do anything. It's I don't the way I read and understand Buddhism Buddhism doesn't have any kind of obligation imposed or required of anybody at all the moral teachings in Buddhism are our guidelines or suggestions are pointers to a way of living that's harmonious and peaceful and doesn't cause trouble for you and your neighbors and people. It's a common sense, but you're not under any obligation to follow the moral precepts of Buddhism. Buddhism doesn't say you should be compassionate and go out and help those people. So if you hear that, that's all you hear today, that's all remember, you're going to leave here and thinking well, that's the kind of died of a religion that's kind of that's kind of cruel or cold hearted and these loot aloof Buddhists who are interested in the world and, you know, you know, if, if we're, you know, if you're really if you're, you know, people are compassionate. Caring for the world, then of course, they're obligated to going. And we kind of some people demand obligation because it's so painful to face the world so painful to see these difficulties, that the idea of being demanding and requiring is one response you have to someone has to deal with us Someone has to help. So you know, and it's too painful not to get that kind of moral injunction, you have to respond to somebody I need any teachings or tell me that you do and what teachings I want some overarching worldview, that's going to teach me how to, you know, that's going to be assure me that there's some, some sense and all this or something. But Buddhism, as I read, it doesn't obligate us to do anything. But it doesn't leave us then I hope to do nothing. Or maybe in some ways, Buddhism does leave us but it leaves us leaves us to the workings of our own hearts. And the question is not what we're obligated to do in response, but the question is Rather to listen to your heart. And so this capacity to be present and to hear and to see and to be open to, and not to react against or close down towards the stay open and relaxed. I think then I believe that most for most people, then that open heart will want to respond.

And so we respond and not because it's an obligation, externally, but rather we respond. Because if we don't respond, if we don't act on that response, we don't act on the hearts wish or impulse. I think we do a kind of violence to ourselves. We bought ourselves up, we close something down. It's like if if you're walking down the street and your friend trips and scrapes or knee or something as hard time getting up. You know, it's pretty natural. thing to reach out your hand and help help the person up and say, How can I do to help you be concerned about the person? No one has to tell you to do that. It's just like, you know, so it's so obvious. But you know, but if but if you feel that impulse to help your person, they have trouble getting up, maybe they can't get up quite, you know, there's, it's really painful, and they're trying to get up. And you say, Well, you know, I know what you might say, but you might just, you know, hold yourself back and not not, not let yourself follow that impulse. I think something that gets shut down or get closed or the kind of something that good happens in us. When something really big happens like this thing in Japan. And we have the capacity to have the heart respond. I think the heart wants to respond. And so how does it respond when we had 911, and here 10 years ago There are many people who are deeply moved by it. But I think not not to have been changed by 911 is a kind of violence to oneself, to just kind of go back to life as usual as if nothing happened. And not to somehow be changed

by something like that, I think is, you know, something's not something's, the heart hasn't been listened to deeply, because the heart responds, the heart wants to change. And so there's no obligation to do anything. But as we learn to be present and turn towards and with calmness and academic equanimity, and then the heart's capacity for love or compassion for caring as a chance to come forth. And I think it's the natural thing to respond and act on it. And I think if we're if we do look for a Buddhist response, Buddhist idea of how to respond, the Buddhist response is, listen to the heart and follow through act on it, don't bottle it up, don't, don't deny it, let it change, you let it affect you, even at the expense that you get uncomfortable, because the status quo gets changed to means you have to move things around a bit. And, or a lot. So this points to kind of an image that I also gave yesterday of how do you know so part part one we learned to be present for ourselves and see what's here and our reactions. We also learn what is the attitude that we have about who we are in relationship to the world? Do we feel like we are efficacious that our efforts make a difference? Do we feel that it's okay to respond? Do we feel that the opposite of that feeling that I can't do anything. Actually, I'm not someone who can act on the world. I'm someone who's being acted on the world all the time. I'm a victim. Things are hard. It's you know, and And I'm constantly fending off difficulties and problems and, and you know, I don't, you know, just overwhelming for me. So what's the attitude view, you know, it's deeply embedded in our psyche, but who we are and our relationship to the world. So in this regard, then there's the kind of analogy that I like to give is that of, if a fly lands on an ant, it's a big deal for the third fly might even buy my DVD bigger, bigger, how big house flies bigger than all and hats are strong, but still. And it's a big deal for the poor hands. But at the same fly lands and elephant, the elephant couldn't care less doesn't affect the elephant. So many of us have problems sooner or later the challenges in our lives, all kinds of challenges. But do you respond to those challenges as an IT like as if you're an ant or a sheep as if you're an elephant

and I think that the training that Buddhism is supposed to is giving us the training of mindfulness, a presence of compassion and kindness all the training to be present in effective way is not pointing to people becoming passive, you know, meditation, couch potatoes, meditative couch potatoes, medicated meditative mushrooms that just sit there like you know, calm looking at whatever's going on Mr. Natural for those of you are old enough never mister natural cartoons. The but Buddhism I'm hoping is training us to be elephants. And so rather than having our reaction or reactivity of our overwhelm, having our fear having our hate, be the operating principle about how we're going to respond to react. The operating principle is that is the is the elephant who can respond that you can act in the world. You can Do something. And so the practice of mindfulness Dr. Buddhism, I'm hoping mixed elephants mixed empowered people, people who, who when they identify themselves as something, they don't identify themselves as the victim mode, but identify themselves as someone who can act in the world. I don't know if we want to call them warriors, but the Buddha was a warrior. Warriors don't sit around and moan the fact that life is hard. I don't think you know, from from a Buddhist point of view, I don't think we need to go look for a metaphysical understanding or overarching understanding of the nature of the cosmos in the world and where we all fit in. That's just more of that kind of old mindset operating. But we can, but if we free ourselves of that, then it's enough. It's really enough. I believe It's beautiful, to not be to not be beautiful to respond, it's beautiful to feel like oh, it's enough to respond, I love them. I don't know if I'll be effective enough make a difference. But I can respond, I can act i can do I can I can make a difference in this world. And the world is made up of many examples of individuals and small groups of people who made a huge difference in many people's lives, the power of individuals of power people working together to do a lot. And so that's what I hope that the Buddhist responses that is that there makes us elephants. And so in terms of Japan, what can we do? I think for right now, it's hard to know what we can do from existence. But I think one of the things we can do is we can donate money to the kind of organizations that specialize And during disaster relief, like the American Red Cross, and it's a huge need for that right now. And I think that's something we can do. And then if we stay present, we

don't do something, forget this. I think over the next days and weeks, we'll learn more and more about what's going to be needed. And what we can do, some of us are not going to be for some, whatever reason are not going to do anything directly for the Japanese. And it's one of my one, you know, I'm often very moved to do something to respond to suffering I see in the world. But I can't do it all. None of us can do it. don't respond to it all. But one response, I think that's very valid is to take the energy, the impulse to try to respond or do some make a difference, and channel that energy to do what you do better. So if you're a teacher, teacher, you know, one response to what happened in Japan is to try to teach your students better. So They become better citizens in the world. If you're a you know, if you're selling anything, you know, just make a difference in your corner of the world and to make it a better place with people around you. And so you you're affected by the International but your, your you your elephant footprints are local. That's where you're affected. So I've talked too long I apologize I meant to have more time for you. I would like to maybe some of you have something you want to say about. About the events in Japan or your reaction, your response your thoughts about it, or what I've said or anything here like

if you're gonna wait for the mic, I'll be in the back.

gotta see a green light switcheroo.

much coverage but one thing It seems I haven't heard as much about looting and people taking things from other people. My understanding is Japan is a very homogeneous society and they take care of each other. And if it is true there hasn't been any looting that is to me is very amazing because I think in other places where there are people struggling that they do tend to take from each other.

Yeah, I've heard some men just heard that as well. I heard that. They all say I've heard I've heard in the last couple of days of people standing in long lines very politely waiting for rations waiting for food and, and I've also cut touch. I was touched by it when I heard of, I think it was a woman who was pulled out of some wreckage, and she apologized for causing trouble. But for the for the rescuers. Sure.

Yeah, I saw I saw you, or one thing. Yeah. Where they were all in line. And they were. Yeah, they were only allowed 10 items each to buy. And yeah, everybody was obeying that nobody was getting excited or stealing. Yeah, I thought that was very incredible. Yeah, model for something else too. It's a beautiful thing to do. To show.

I was gonna say something similar to that which I had heard on PBS. But another ironic thing is we're talking about IRC. And the first thing I thought it was International Rescue Committee, because they are known as a very good charity, as far as you know, really doing what they say they're going to do. And I got an email tonight, but I haven't had a chance to look at it yet. So in addition to IRC, the retreat center, people could look at that website and see what they're saying because I think it might be useful insight. I mean, insect rescue International Rescue Committee.

Great. Thank you.

I remember you give us a talk about Burma, what happened in Burma and you said that, remember, we can start doing things here. You know, we can take care of what's happening there. But here, and everyday things can happen. You see someone that needs helping you jump in. And that's what we can do now.

Yeah, I can tell you, I wouldn't underestimate the importance of that. If you look at your heart and see what works for your heart,

on it.

With the events, also, it's a respect of nature, something bigger than when I when I saw the waves coming into the videos, and I realize how deeply I have to respect nature every day, and it's almost like it's our duty to do that. So that's, that's something to be

very, very respectful of it.

Yes, do you want to wait for you want to wait for this so people can hear you.

I was very mood reading in the newspaper about the kids from the school. Somehow they got mobilized, I think this one boy in this family wanted to do something. So the kids in the school, went out to different big company, and they went in there and asked for donations. And I thought, My God at that time of life to be doing something like that, I thought, it's gonna make a big change in our life. It's early. And I thought, here I am. I didn't even have a thought.

Look at the kids. Beautiful. Yeah.

Thank you. Then what are the interesting coincidences? small small ones. So yesterday, you know, I gave his talk on what's going on in Japan. And but yesterday also we had canceled a special event we were going to do it. After the regular Dharma talk on Sunday morning, we're gonna do this, there was called the launching party or launching kind of presentation of the inside world aid, which is a nonprofit, some people in our community have created coming out of our community to be able to go abroad to places like Cambodia and do medical missions and try to help people there. And so, you know, we tried to get the word out that we cancelled it. And I was going to give some talk about something completely unrelated. And then, so we can still cancel the launch of this new nonprofit. But the whole Dharma talk was about, you know, was quoting, you know, closely connected. So some of you might be interested in and in over the next year's will didn't work some of us are going to develop this inside world aid kind of organization to go do interesting, interesting work around the world in places. So some of us are baby elephants, but I hope we all become elephants. So anyway, thank you.