

2011-04-04 What The Buddha Taught

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SPEAKERS

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This evening, I would like to tell you about two conversations or exchanges the Buddha had in his time and the first on the surface might seem very simplistic, but the implications I believe are significant. A man came to the Buddha and asked him what he taught, what is it you teach? The reasonable question. And the Buddha's reply was, I teach what should be, what should not be done, and I teach what should be done. So, for people who are allergic to shoulds, and oughts, this is bad news. No, no. Here's something else is telling me what I shouldn't do and shouldn't do and it's kind of oppressive right to have that. A lot of that gone. have been told. But one of the things that's remarkable this, this part of the conversation is that in being asked what he teaches me this is like, you know, he didn't know it at the time. But now 2500 years later, we can see it. He was one of the great religious teachers of humankind. And so many people are interested in what does the Buddha have to teach? You know, what's the central thing and the here this great rogue religion was reduced to the simple statement that I can teach you what you shouldn't do. And what you should do is maybe a little bit disappointing. Even I mean, that's all that's all you got. And, but it's interesting, what is what that statement is not doing. It's not offering a tenant or a belief. It's not saying, you know, that I teach about cosmic consciousness I teach about God I teach about You know, you know, the fundamental beliefs that you have to believe in are supernatural. It's not, it's not like he's not saying it's not any kind of tenant for rather, he's pointing to action, activity, what you can do and what you maybe shouldn't do. And the Buddha over and over again, in very one way or the other, is almost always pointing back to activity to what we can do to make a difference in our lives. Not what we can believe, but rather what we can do. If you look at many other religious teachings, more often they begin with what you have to believe, rather than what you should be doing. And so I think it's one of the one of the things that points to the very grounded are down to earth practical aspects of that was the foundation of Buddhism. So then this fellow asked the Buddha, what should I do and what Shouldn't I do? You know, it's explained further. And he said, The Buddha replies, you should avoid doing those things that harm yourself or cause harm to body. body and mind should avoid just to avoid causing. And what you should do is those things that benefit your body. It I don't think it use the pronoun benefit the body, and the mind has kind of scopes the whole who we are. And again, this might also seem pretty simplistic. In a sense, it is simplistic. And it seems like as an ordinary kind of kindergarten, teaching, you should do what's good, do what's you know, avoid causing harm, and you should do things that are beneficial. And it can seem moralistic first he says what you shouldn't do what you Shouldn't do and now he says he's gonna do what's not what's good and what's avoid what's harmful. But again, he is pointing something that's experiential, we can directly experience when we're doing something that's harmful. And not all the time directly, but you can feel when they're suffering when there's distress when there's contraction when there's pain. And we can feel and experience when there's happiness and joy and peace, kind of release of suffering. So these are something that's verifiable in your own experience.

And so he's again, he's not putting something abstract or something metaphysical or something that seems otherworldly, the Buddhist pointing again, back to something that's grounded in our ordinary human experience. And it's an ordinary thing in human life, to avoid the things that are harmful, and to engage in things that are beneficial if you have a splinter. That's harming you, usually you will take it out. If you have a choice, or whether it's drive down two roads, one is congested traffic, and one has a beautiful view of somewhere, I think you'd choose that which is more relaxing and pleasant to go on. Pretty simple to do is that all Buddhism has to teach? In a sense, all the Buddhism follows on this idea. But what's special about Buddhism is not that it's, it's not, you know, that has this profound teaching. Because that's not very profound. What I said, I don't think, but what's profound about Buddhism is how thoroughly it's applied into our lives. How how it's you learn to apply it or spread it into the, into the breadth and depth of our human life. The Buddhist analysis of the human being is almost everything we are is activity. We can begin shaping or changing that activity. The mind in Buddhism is not a thing. It's an activity or series of activities. And Buddhism, you meant to start taking responsibility for the activities of your mind. Not easy to do. But that's the direction we're going. But in taking responsibility for them is to say we can follow up on this very simple idea to avoid those activities which cause harm. And to do those activities, which are beneficial that bring benefit to us. And so we're going to get in there. So as one of the purposes of meditation, it's still and concentrated in mindful. So you can see the subtlety by which the activities of the mind and heart operate that cause us suffering. subtlety doesn't mean that it's inconsequential. Some of the deepest and most strongest operating principles in our psyche are subtle or deeply buried. You don't see him very much, but they influence everything. We do. Now in this analysis of the human life, looking at what's beneficial, that was beneficial, not the same thing as pleasure. And there's plenty of people pursue pleasure. Things that are stimulate their pleasure, they stimulate the pleasure centers in the brain, and people get addicted to it. The pursuit of pleasure and in doing that some people do the things they know they shouldn't do, because it's harmful, addictive behavior of a whole range of things. So one of the reasons people get caught by it is that it's, it's pleasant. Recently, I got one of these smartphones, and someone and someone put a game on it. It's called, it's a kind of a kind of a spelling game supposed to fail as many game words as you can. And so I got interested in I started doing it. And it was, it was enjoyable. It was pleasant. I caught this pleasure doing it. But when I finished doing it, I felt drained. It was an interesting juxtaposition. Feeling the pleasure, but not feeling a deeper satisfaction and nourishment. And when we don't feel deeply nourished, then and you don't know what nourishment is, then the tendency as well to go from more pleasure. And it feels really good, you feel kind of you kind of kind of energized by it. So that's not but in Buddhism, we said, That's not ultimately your long term beneficial to just stimulate the pleasure center. Is there another source of another kind of benefit, we can experience another source of nourishment. And the nourishment that Buddhism considers to be most valuable is that upwelling of sense of peace, of nourishment of love, of wisdom, that can kind of bubble up from inside, independent of how our senses are stimulated. And so we're not looking for stimulation activities, experiences out there to make us feel good, but rather a deep opening and settling that allows something deeper to Kind of pour through us. And that language of pouring through or upwelling or flowing through us is one that the Buddha used as well, for the kind of deep sense of well being that can occur when you get really skilled at avoiding what's harmful and doing what's beneficial. So that's the first conversation that ended that way, the editing this guy, the guy was delighted by the Buddhist answers.

Yeah, avoid what's harmful and do what's beneficial. And I believe one of the reasons he was delighted was that he was quite versed in all the different schools of Philosophy and Religion of his time. And he could see what a radical teaching this was compared to the other religions of his time, even though it can seem like kindergarten Buddhism or something kind of lessons you give kids. So the second conversation has to do with young monk who's attending the Buddha. And the two of them are just two of them are together. And it has to do with an abandoned exchange that they have. But I'd like to start

that story with the poem that ends the story. And this particular collection called the Udāna. Dāna means some like inspired utterances. And in the ancient world, people often were quite skilled at spontaneous use of poetry or song in a way that you know, kind of literate cultural reread and stuff, we don't have that innate or develop that capacity. So the Buddha supposedly just kind of produced this poem on the spot. In English it goes like this. Little thoughts, subtle thoughts. When followed, stir up the heart, not comprehending the thoughts of the heart when runs here and there, the mind of control, but comprehending the thoughts of the heart, when who is ardent, mindful restrains them. When followed. They stir up the heart, when who is awakened, lets them go without trace. So here we're talking about the subtle movements of the mind. Maybe many of you can have the wisdom to put down your smartphone at the right time. But when you sit and meditate, you have the wisdom and the ability to put down the subtle thoughts or the gross thoughts that your mind is preoccupied with and concerned with and takes you this way in that way. And your thoughts might seem important and captivating, but they're not the thinking is seldom going to provide you with a deep nourishment that can up well from the heart or from within. So one of the skills in Buddhism is to If you really want to do what's beneficial, you need to learn to let go of following and chasing after the all the subtle thoughts that can arise. It's not easy to do. It takes a tremendous sense of mindfulness, of attention of skill, and understanding of what it's like to be peaceful, to understand that it's actually better for you and are more satisfying and more meaningful and nourishing, to let go of things that we're often running after. And if, if you think you're not addicted to anything, try letting go of your thoughts. You know, it's, you know, yeah, Hi, I'm Gil. I'm a thinker. You know, once a thinker, always a thinker, you know, it just you know, the way that the mind works. It's quite humbling. So here, following after your thoughts, keeps the mind stirred up. Letting Go allows the heart to settle on itself. So this is the poem that we put at the end of this exchange. So the Buddha is together with him Meghiya. Meghiya is a younger monk new to the practice. And he goes out in the morning for his alms round amongst the nuns at that time, didn't keep food and didn't eat unless people in the villages gave me food in the morning. So he went out for his arms, way back from his arms. He saw this beautiful mango growth. And he saw that Grove and he said, that is a great place to meditate. To go on retreat, it's peaceful, it's serene, it's undisturbed by things I, you know, I'm human, you know, I'm here to really practice my spiritual life. I'm motivated, I'm serious. That's a good place I should give myself over. I sort of like to do is to go there meditate. So since he's attending the Buddha, he goes back to the Buddha and he says, As I was walking along the banks of the river, I saw a pleasing charming mango grove. Seeing it the thought occurred to me, how pleasing and charming is this mango grove. It is an ideal place for a young person intent on practice to exert himself in meditation. If the Buddha gives me permission, I would like to exert myself in meditation in this mango grove.

If the Blessed One gives me permission, I would like to go, please give me permission. So the Buddha says, as long as I am still alone, stay here until another monk comes. So he's being attended by the monk, right. So, you know, stay here with me until someone else can be my attendant or be with me. So maybe a reasonable request. Meghiya doesn't take that standing. So he repeats his request. And the Buddha repeats his answer Meghiya asks a third time. Now it seems in the ancient world least ancient Buddhist world, that if you ask the Buddha the same thing three times, he'll say yes. He like yes you know enough already or something. You know, you're not going to listen to me then go Be my guest.

So the Buddha says, finally, as you are talking about practice Meghiya What can I say? You know, like, Am I gonna stop you from practicing? Do what you think it is now time to do. Then Venerable Meghiya, rising from a seat, bowing down to the Buddha went to the mango grove. On arrival and gone deep into the grove. He sat down at the foot of a certain tree for too many Meditate. Now, while venerable Meghiya was staying in the mango grove, he was for the most part assailed by three kinds of unskillful

thoughts. Thoughts of sensual desire of sex, maybe thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of doing harm. The thought occurred to him how amazing how awesome this guy loved this answer. I love this. You know, that's his reaction. Most people get Oh shit. Yeah, this is embarrassing. This is difficult. But why? He says, Wow, this is amazing. How awesome. We can learn from this. Even though it was through faith that I went forth from home to homeless life became a monastic. Still, I am overpowered By these three kinds of unskillful thoughts, sensual thoughts, thoughts of ill will and thoughts of doing harm. Emerging from seclusion in the late afternoon, he went to the blessing one and said on arrival. Just now while I was staying in the mango grove, I was assailed by these three kinds of thoughts sent your thoughts, ill will, and thoughts of doing harm. It was amazing, it was awesome. And then the Buddha replies, my Gaea in one whose awareness release or is the kind of technical word whose minds capacity for liberation is still immature. Five qualities bring it to maturity. So which five so it's not just a matter of going off to meditate? A lot of people want to make It sometimes for the wrong reasons. Some people are some, you know, gung ho they think meditation is the heart and the be all of Buddhist Buddhism and they want to get to the real thing right away. But sometimes it's better to wait. Sometimes you need to do the preparation to be ready for it, to create the right conditions so that the mind can really settle and not be filled with all kinds of issues that get in the way. There are many years ago, there was I was teaching a class on Buddhism, to some kind of senior practitioners. And I invited into the class, this woman who was studying Buddhism at Stanford, as in graduate school, she had been a lawyer and she dropped out of law and was, you know, interested in Buddhism. And she was she was originally from Taiwan. Meaning what I mean by that is that she was raised as a Buddhist that was her. She had this kind of Faith in Buddhism that a lot of the Western Congress on have a different kind of faith and dedication, and it was her. It was her native religion. And in here she left law in order to devote herself to Buddhism, taking it really seriously. And studying in college and getting to the graduate level. And so I asked her, do you meditate? She had a Buddhist teacher who she was devoted to, and do you meditate? And she gave what I for me was an amazing answer. She says, No, not yet. I'm preparing myself for that. And it kind of blew me away because I was kind of the school here in the west of those who, you know, if you thought about Buddhism, we thought about meditation. We were new to it all. We read these books, and we just jumped into meditation. It's like, just go right to the heart of it. And get us get on with it, get on with it. And I was still kind of kind of beautifully inspired and a little bit humbled by someone who had such respect for the whole process of practice that felt that you know, you know, I'll get to that but I have to do I have to take care of things my first and prepare myself for it. So here perhaps Meghiya wasn't ready.

And he needed to do other work first find do something else. Sometimes people are so focused on meditation because they think that it's some magical experience, which is going to somehow solve their problems. It's going to make them enlightened if I just find the key if that thing that one experience. It's all about having some kind of cosmic experience of great bliss experience. That's it. There certainly are dramatic experiences that are very important and transformative. But for the most part, Buddhism is pretty brisk practice is pretty ordinary. It's big. It's about taking care of one's ordinary day to day life. So we live in the simple ways of our life in ways that don't cause harm. And help create bit what's beneficial in how we drive and how we talk and how we shop and how we do many different things, how we relate to our friends, how we do our work, how we deal with our employers or employees. And so it's the small things that we train ourselves and shape ourselves and do the transformation. I've known people who have jumped into deep meditation practice long retreats, and had dramatic real dramatic experiences. That and in the wake of those experiences, ended up becoming more conceited than they were before. And so attached to so focused on their great experience that they kind of just kind of bulldoze over the people didn't really notice or other people there. And one of the, this is, I think, to the point but many many years ago Some years ago, I was kind of present for a gathering a meeting of the nine or so most senior Zen teachers in America at that time, venerable old, you know, serious Zen teachers. And some

of us were attending them and bringing them dirty and doing different things. Or they're having their meeting. And I remember there was one of them. If you brought him his tea, or, you know, took his dirty plate away from his dinner table or something, he would turn to you and treat you as if you were just as important as the others and masters at the table. You felt like you were just, you know, you were respected and cared for the fact that he was one of the greats and masters. You know, you know, he didn't, he didn't feel like he was holding that or holding a position. And some of the other ones unfortunately, were quite had very say this way very big personalities. So, you know, you can have big experiences and hold yourself up. And then you kind of do the humble work of just looking at your practice, at the simple practice of finding your peace finding how to improve this life for yourself and others in the simple ordinary things of daily life. So perhaps Miguel was kind of focused on the kind of like, big bang theory or Buddhism, you know, I'm gonna go do it, this is the time to do it, who knows? But he was not ready for his meditation. So the Buddhist wants to explain to him what it takes to be ready, the kind of maturity, I love, the expression, maturity, spiritual maturity, and I kind of prefer rather than talking about people who are enlightened people have great realization. I prefer To talk about people who aren't mature in the practice, because then it's not like all or nothing, and it's kind of ordinary thing to suddenly be too mature to grow, to evolve to develop. And to put all this emphasis on a dramatic moment of experience, I think misses the real point of what Buddhism is pointing towards. So here at least they use the word maturity.

So there are five qualities that bring the mind to maturity. First, the monk is virtuous. The monastic dwells restrained in accordance to the monastic rules, careful and complete, are here this question is consummate in his behavior. He trains himself having undertaken the training rules, and sees danger in the slightest faults. So for lay people are not monastics You know, you're not following training rules Exactly. But to be concerned about your behavior, your ethical behavior, and be concerned not even make the slightest fault. Be careful with your speech, not to lie in any kind of way, careful in, you know, not taking your pencils from work unless they're freely given, you know, their you know, or not killing your neighbor's dog because it barks too much. You know, there's a whole slew of things that people do, but being very careful, not the slightest fault. And I think it's one of the beautiful things that inspire me. When I meet practitioners or anyone who are very careful about not doing anything that's causes harm, even the slightest kind of harm. It's a beautiful quality. The work of course can use more of that. So that's the first thing is the emphasis on virtue in your ethical behavior. Furthermore, a second Quality is being able to hear at will easily without difficulty talks that are truly conducive to the opening of awareness. So the opening of your heart opening of awareness with which kind of makes you more receptive and open or free. So back then they had no books. So the teachings were only received by hearing it from someone else. Perhaps nowadays it would say Furthermore, when is able to hear Listen, read, watch, get on to the internet, easily listen to audio Dharma, you know, somehow have access to the teachings easily. And it's remarkable. You know how much easier the access is now in the ancient world or stories you can just 60 years ago in Thailand, but people who would walk for six or nine months across Thailand to go find a teacher to hear teachings and You know, if we can't be, you know, Google it quickly, you know, you know, is it worth it? So when so be able to hear the teachings easily. And one of the things about hearing easily is to be receptive to it, to have a certain kind of openness and respect that allows it to come in to here as well. But then he goes on to say it's interesting. So what are those teachings? And he says, It describes them talk, teachings on modesty, contentment, seclusion, non entanglement, arousing persistence, virtue, concentration, wisdom, release, and the knowledge and vision of release. Perhaps this sounds a little bit discouraging it's kinda like ethical again, perhaps he's Buddhist or so ethical, dangerously puritanical, maybe. But again, I want to point out that this is Not a belief in what do you what is Buddhism teaching? It's not pointing to a key to like an abstract teaching or metaphysical teaching or supernatural teaching. It's pointing to behavior and activity and how we conduct ourselves in our life. And I think it's well worth considering

how these kinds of training in these kinds of activities with these these kinds of qualities, how they might be beneficial for us, and how the opposite of them are not beneficial. How immodesty, discontentment. What's the opposite of seclusion, you know, being caught up in lots of business perhaps being entangled. So he would be able to hear teachings like this. Perhaps because hearing teachings like that regularly, inspires us, points us in the right direction supports us, helps us to let go and relax and be simple enough required enough or settled enough so that we can develop the mind to see the subtlety, the depth of the psyche. A lot of what Buddhism has to teach is purposeful. If you if you want to attain a certain purpose, this is the way you can do it.

So it isn't that you should be modest or be content. There's no, Buddhism doesn't say that. It's absolutely some absolute rule. But it says, If what you want to do is to train your mind and your heart, to be able to let go of the subtlest places of clinging, of attachment of preoccupation of agitation. If you really want to discover the deepest wellsprings of nourishment that can bubble up from within. It's helpful if you cultivate the degree of modesty or contentment or disentanglement, or a simple lifestyle. It's helpful. That's the emphasis. Rather than an absolute moral imperative use, thou shalt you know that only Buddhism ever does that kind of approach and the third quality is that he keeps his persistence aroused by abandoning unskillful things unskillful activities, and, and takes on skillful activities or qualities. So this is the kind of thing we talked about earlier, you have some sense of what is harmful or unskillful. And you have some sense of what is beneficial, what is skillful. And you train yourself to choose one over the other. And have that ability to choose one over the other can be as simple as choosing which road to go on. Because it's going to be better for how your state of your mind and it can be as complex as deciding what kind of livelihood and career you're going to do. Or it could be what kind of what what you think about, I track my thoughts a lot in the daily life. And there's sometimes I see taking this train of thought is not useful. I'm not going to go there. Thank you. I think think about something more useful. It's pretty easy to do that for me now. Just you know, let's let's see. Do something else here. So cultivating that ability to change directions and do what's skillful then the fourth quality is Miss. last touch here, I'm sorry. But, you know, you probably besides having for when a monk has a nice goes, and then the next one is the monk is wise or discerning has has the ability to see and pay careful attention and do a kind of healthy discrimination, healthy discernment. And to see you know, the ability to see what's helpful and what's harmful is discernment is discrimination is being able to differentiate. Here the person develops the kind of keen insight that a person starts seeing impermanence see how things arise and how things pass away. Perhaps in another talk, I'll talk about why this is so important for Buddhists in Buddhism. But for now say this is the, the most central insight that the Buddha was pointing to, that is attained through meditation through mindfulness concentration, is a deep insight in how things come into how things arise and how things pass away. And there's something about the clear, deep concentrated insight into this, which liberates the mind from what it claims to. Partly because it's very hard to cling to things which are arising and passing away. Because you know, you're not there long enough. And also because you realize maybe they're not worth clinging to, if they're going to pass away. And they're not worth resisting. If you can't resist them because they're rising, that can be much more ease and equanimity and freedom in the seeing of the rising and passing of things. So I know that may be hard to understand the simple words I've said but for now, just Let you know this is a central insight in Buddhism. So then when it goes on to say, when a person when a monk has, oh, this is what I missed. I missed the first one. That's why I got confused, I apologize. So, the first one is when has good friends, good spiritual friends.

So then the Buddha kind of sums it up. So continue says, if a person has good spiritual friends, companions and comrades, then chances are that person will be virtuous. If the person has good spiritual friends, chances are the person will have easy access to talk conversations, teachings, discussions with friends about these good qualities and good ways of action and behavior to try Be

cultivating in Buddhism, if you have good spiritual friends, is expected that you will be persistent in avoiding what's unskillful and doing what's skillful. And if you have good friends, then it's expected that you'll be able to develop the discernment to see the arising and passing of things. So I find this interesting that each of the other four qualities is supported by having good spiritual friends or having community being in relationship to people who inspire you, who support you who are on the same path, who can walk the path with you. And, and this is really important. This case of Miguel, he went off to practice by himself alone in the forest. And he had the best spiritual friend around. He had the Buddha right. And the Buddha said, Don't go, you know, and he went anyway. Maybe the Buddha knew this man was not ready to do that kind Practice alone, he needed to mature and develop in other ways before he could go off and do this the practice. And so, and then he gives this then the Buddha gives this poem, little thoughts, subtle thoughts when followed it stir up the heart, not comprehending the thoughts of the heart, when runs here and there, the mind out of control, but comprehending the thoughts of the heart when he was ardent, mindful restrains them. When followed, they stir up the heart, when who is awakened lets them go without trace.

So, a couple of words in summary, I'd like to emphasize again that the fundamental principles of Buddhism are really simple. succinctly simple. If you expect to be part of a world religion that has great profound, wonderful philosophies, it's really just very practical. It's this very simple idea that your actions have consequences. You can take responsibility for your actions. And you can choose to do those actions which avoid harming, and which create benefits. As you have, as you pay mindful attention, you start getting a sense of what's really beneficial, and what maybe might seem beneficial, but not really, and Vivian kind of separating out and finding what's deeply, deeply nourishing, peaceful, meaningful within us. And then we begin moving in that direction. But it didn't move in that direction to be able to apply this to the full depths, and the full range of what our human life is about. It helps to have good spiritual friends. It helps to have community to do it together. Other people It helps to be virtuous, it's helpful to have some kind of regular contact with teachings that kind of nudge you in that direction that pointing that direction inspire you. And this is useful to do. I know of many people I talked to a lot of people find it very hard sometimes to do this practice, when they're alone, when they're the only person they know who's practicing. And the people at work, think they're weird. Because they meditate. And so to have other people around who share this and support it, and see how valuable it is. Sometimes it's really necessary to be able to follow through. And it's one of the beautiful things in life, I think profound things is to be able to follow this path all the way and to follow the way they say, revolutionizes the heart, turns the heart inside out upside down. So that rather than being closed and Rather than being limited or scared, the heart becomes open, transparent, fluid, peaceful. And hopefully, it becomes at your heart becomes a beautiful gift to the world around you. Because in the end, what I hope is that all this Buddhist practice is done so that we can benefit the world, not just for ourselves, but for everyone's sake. It's a beautiful path. So I hope that's okay. That work, there's a talk and I wish you well, may you all do what's beneficial. Thank you.