

2012-03-18 Three Ways of Understanding The Path

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SPEAKERS

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Good morning. And should we turn the lights on or we like it this way, subdued lights. That's the wrong switch. That's Yeah.

There we go. Great. Thank you. I was told that when they originally built this church in early 1950s, a member of the congregation was a local engineer who went a little bit overboard in engineering the light system, including when enough he still had this big wheel. I mean, have you ever noticed our historical wheel in the back over there? That's for turning piloting the boat. It's for the dimming switch. Little lights. So the people in the outer Hall are happy sitting in the dark. Okay. Out in the dark. We're so the one announcement I'd like to make is that in two sets two Saturdays from now that we're going to have our big fundraising event here for our retreat center. And it's we calling it a fund raiser because it's supposed to be fun. West this score is going to come West this girl's a Dharma teacher is also a wonderful comedian and relic from the 60s and a harbinger from the future and wonderful men. Very funny. And so we're gonna do this kind of unusual event here at IMC kind of nice fun, no event with reception and very various things happening here. As a fundraiser. It's one of the few events we ever do here that we're asking people to make a donation beforehand to buy a ticket, or to buy a share in our IPO in our initial practice opportunity that we're creating for our retreat center. So you're all welcome to come and if you want us if you want to buy a ticket or buy a share, by merit or whatever inspires you. I think there's flyers out there to tell you how to do that.

So, for the talk today, I think I still would like to continue a little bit with that kind of momentum of the talks of the last four weeks, I think. And last week I talked about the Dharma and the Dharma being something which the Buddha described as being visible here. And now, something you can attain experience and see, in a very simple, direct way, not in a mystical way, sometimes Dharma is mystical associations. And and, but I think his definition of how to see the Dharma here now was not mystical or, or supernatural or mysterious, but rather was in a very ordinary way in which we could see at times are, how our mind is caught and how our mind is uncaught The mind is with greed and how its mind went without greed, minds with hate. And when it's without teeth, there's simple movement of the mind. And so the practice in Buddhism as a big part of being as interior, where you have to be able to look at your own mind or your own hearts in a deep way. And the process of doing that, as puts us on what's called an Buddhism, a path mug guy in Pali. And what I wanted to do today is to talk about three different understandings of the path, the path can unfold for people. And part of the motivation for this is to convey or explain that the path is. This can be seen from different vantage points, different ways of wishing unfolds, but also that it unfolds differently for different people, and also unfolds differently for

different people at different stages of their life for different stages of their practice. Different phases of life. And it's very easy to talk about the practice from Once you choose one of these three modes of talking about it, and some people specialize in one mode more than the other. And it seemed like this is what it's all about. And then either people feel strongly connected, oh, this is for me, this is right. Or they feel like this leaves me out because it doesn't meet me in phase of my life where I'm at and are the kind of personality or something. And as a teacher, one of the challenges is to be aware of these different modes of practice different ways of the path control for people, and how to teach in a way that doesn't limit people to just one of them. This is or give people the impression This is the truth and the right way. So the three modes or three understandings of the path of practice This that I'd like to offer are the path of cultivation, the path of letting go and the path of no path. Now the path of cultivation, development comes from the Pali word Bhavana. And Baba means something like to make something come into being. It's used for cultivating like a cultivating plants, sometimes translated as development. And it points to the very human capacity of developing ourselves of growing in variety of ways in our growth. And it's something that all humans have not only the capacity, but something all humans go through development and growth, and you'll see it most pronounced in children. You see a gradual progressive developmental stages and children as they grow up and And it was pretty good guess that the time the day that you became an adult was 1821 32 whatever it was, you became an adult, still waiting 73 that the day that you became an adult that developmental growth didn't stop then that we continue to grow and develop into our adulthood. And in fact, for most of us, I think if you're already, you know, advanced in ages, if enough, you can look back at your early adulthood, and you'll probably see that you've changed quite a bit, that you have grown, develop certain capacities that you have in wisdom, understanding that you're in some ways a different person than you were when you were in your 20s.

And so it's a very ordinary part of human life, the developmental stages that people go through. Sometimes those two development stages are go faster or slower depending on what life occurs would have occurs to us as we live our lives. Some people encounter some of the tremendous challenges of life very early and early on, where they get sick, or someone they know die or their paradise when they're still a child themselves, or they go through war, or there's all kinds of unexpected traumas, tragedies, challenges, that people experiences and that can happen anytime in life. Some people are not prepared for the huge challenges. Some people have a philosophy of life that doesn't allow themselves to, you know, they've been fortunate enough, everything's going along well, and so their philosophy of life which kind of doesn't have space for dealing with tragedy because they haven't really visited it, or they haven't prepared themselves. They don't have the wisdom, the Mindfulness, the equanimity, the, you know, whatever it takes to really go through a tragedy that might come along. And some people have some people have developed, it's painfully not because they practice because they've been alive through it all. And I've met people who've never had any contact with Buddhist practice, who are wiser than some Buddhists I know because of how they've been matured in the process of dealing with the challenges of their life. So the idea that there can be development and growth isn't is something that Buddha emphasized, in fact, he said very explicitly that the path The path that he was teaching is a gradual path, gradual step by step path. And so when would start with something like cultivating one's ethical Foundation, ethics, crindars Qatar foundation. So once integrity and whatnot, start With meditation boats start with refraining from killing and stealing and sexual misconduct and lying and, and engaging in getting drunk or intoxicated with drugs or alcohol. And that it takes for some people, it's a huge task to get their ethical foundation established as part of their growth and maturation is to do that. And then when we develop meditation practices, the bhava now the cultivation of concentration, or of loving kindness or of mindfulness, and the variety of the kind of mental qualities that come along with this inner development of the mind, things like equanimity patience, energy, compassion, joy, delight, tranquility, in a variety of inner qualities that can become stronger and

stronger and can meet practitioners who can see you can tell you can feel that their equanimity is quite strong and developed or their calm is well developed or their, their capacity for mindfulness is quite strong their presence is really they tangibly feel a sense of presence with them. And they weren't always like that. But after practicing for some time, these qualities get stronger and stronger. And it's quite inspiring to see. And it's been very important for me in the course of my practice, to have encountered people who have practiced before me people who are further along than me in a sense, and to see not just know about them, but to actually witness they go through their life and see the presence and the compassion and the kindness that they have. And it's inspired me to kind of cultivate some of those myself as well. So the personal path of cultivation. So, so, traditionally said you start with ethics, then with meditation, and then with that as a foundation, then the next day As wisdom or insight, you cultivate your wisdom and insight into a deeper understanding of this life that we're living. And this, in turn, hopefully leads to liberation. So here liberation is sometimes seen as the end result of a path of practice, there's a there's a goal. And that goal is found by following by walking a gradual path that leads there.

Some people find that this idea of a gradual path, very inspiring, very meaningful, can give some people the deepest sense of meaning in their life. Because to have a path as me you can do that can make a difference for yourself and for others, some of the deepest existential issues that all human beings have to face can give much more meaning in life than a career or, or having money or, you know, many of the things that people pursue, and, but cultivates a deep abiding sense of wisdom and peace, compassion, to show that It's possible to set the heart deeply at peace, and to share that gift with the world. I think it's a beautiful thing. So some people find that this is very meaningful to have a sense of a path and growth and development, you can do something. Other people find it very discouraging. And the variety of different reasons they find it discouraging. One is, I can't do that. That's too hard. It's too difficult. Or, you know, in my circumstances of my life, I mean, it's just, it's just oppressive to hear about this stuff and develop your concentration and wisdom and go on retreats. I mean, I have all these kids at home after work, and I have to do all this stuff to do and I think this Buddhist path is made for is meant for really monks. And they don't seem to understand laypeople and how laypeople supposed to know the challenges they have and, and, and, and so I don't feel like it just works for me because I can see how I can't don't see how I can develop myself. Or there's other arguments or other reasons people could get discouraged somebody said The path of development lends itself to idealism. There's this great ideal of what you can get. And I've known people, people here and IMC even, who have gotten really, really caught in the idealism of attaining something through this gradual path. And, and then they huff and a puff. And the house doesn't fall. The only thing that falls apart is them. And, you know, it just it just they don't get anywhere partly because of the way they're practicing. If you're straining and huffing and puffing to, you know, get calm. You know, it kind of doesn't work. And so the idea is, so some people then feel very discouraged because they put tremendous amount of effort. There's no shortage of effort for some people and falling developmental path, but it doesn't leave very far for them, or doesn't lead where they want to go and so they get really discouraged by it. In the end And then there are people who follow it, who actually slowly follow it. Sometimes they don't even know they're following it. They realize in retrospect that they look back after five years or 10 years and say, Wow, I've really come a long way compared to where I was that was that. I didn't see the changes over time. They were so gradual that they were imperceptible from day to day. But over time, they really changed. One of my favorite analogies for the change that happens as people engage in practice is that of two parallel lines. You know, they say, I mean, follow it to the end, but they say that two parallel lines never meet. And they just stay to, you know, equal distance from each other. And but if you take one pair of one of the lines and nudge it ever so slightly off to the side, and then you follow it, then initially you won't see they'll look parallel. Still, initially, they won't look much different from distance. But slowly over time, they diverged further and further and further until

eventually they're quite far apart. So a little difference in one's practice a little difference in changing one's life with one's ethics, one's mindfulness, one's concentration. small change might not seem very big today, or tomorrow or next week. And but in five years, it can be a huge difference. Where your life where it takes you in your life. And it might seem that five years is so far in the future, who would want to bother thinking about five years from now, but if you remember how quickly the last five years went, then five, you know, you know, practicing for five years from now is you know, that's goes pretty quickly. So some people that you know, it's really meaningful and inspiring to see how much they change and the idea that there's cultivation and growth gives them a lot of faith and confidence in both the practice Buddhism following a path and a lot of confidence in themselves, confidence that they can change and they can change for the better.

The other. So the next kind of mode or understanding of the path is that is the path of letting go. And some teachers specialize in this, where they'll, if you say you want to develop anything, they'll pull the rug from under that they'll say No way, there's nothing to develop or, or that's going the wrong way, or one of the common critiques I've heard is that if you're focusing on developing something on a goal, then you'll miss the present moment. Because if you're so caught up in the goal, and looking for the goal, measuring yourself against the goal, you're really concerned about the future, a virtual imaginary world in the future. And so you miss the vibrancy of life here and now. And so you should just forget about goals and focus on just let go of that and focus on here right now. There are teachers who say there is nothing ultimately to attain. It's mostly practices about annotating. And we have to, you know, we know the whole idea of attaining lends itself to egoism, being self centered, selfish, and, and I'm the one who has attained I'm the most enlightened person in my block. Thank you. And, you know, and so you know, you know that in Buddhism, there's so much freedom in that but there's freedom and just in in letting go, letting go, the clinging, letting go of selfishness, letting go of attachment to self, letting go of attachment to things into people or whatever. And so it's, it's about just letting go, let go, let go let go. And I've known practitioners who have followed the path of letting go to great benefit to them. They just kind of every time their mind gets involved in something, they let go, they let go. They don't let it Don't. Don't let anything linger in their mind. Don't get involved in anything that just Let go. Let go. Let go. And since most stress, most suffering comes from preoccupation comes from being attached to something, or letting go can relieve a tremendous amount of suffering. And, and can make a radical revolution in people's hearts and minds of who they are. It's hard to path of letting go because it doesn't offer anything, or seemingly doesn't offer much. Sometimes it's easier, easier to believe in agency, I can do something, there's some place I can get. And, you know, if you're just about letting go it's kind of like, then you don't do anything at all. And if you can't do anything at all that I'm not safe, I'm not developing myself. I'm not getting a badge to show that I'm a good spiritual person, successful person. And, and it just seems like kind of letting go leaves me with nothing. And then you know, that feels very like nothing. And, you know feels you've mixed people feel more vulnerable or empty or kind of realistic or something. And you go to some teachers who teach letting go and say, but this path leads me leads to nothing, and the teacher just beams and smiles. That's right. Isn't that great? And the answer and some, you know, so when I was doing the Zen tradition practicing Zen there, I got the sense that the one of the primary techniques so the practice for approaches back to is pulling the rug from any place you want to stand any place you want to hold on to anything, any goal, any desire, any attainment, you know, heaven forbid you go to a Zen master and say you have experienced some kind of deep meditative experience, realization experience or attainment. They'll just look at you and say, Great, something else to let go of. You don't know Hold on to that even. And just go on. And you know, you go to a Zen teacher and you say, you know, you know, it happens, you know, it happens a lot. You really want to go tell your teacher, some teacher about this great meditation experience you had last year, or last week. And for you know, these especially Zen masters, I mean, last week, I mean, that's like, that's disappeared into the time of the pharaohs who could care less about last week? You know, it's but now,

now is what's important. And you're still caught up in what you happened last week. Last week, I attained no self. I attained no self. Who could care less what happened last week? What matters is you know, for Zen master, you go see a Zen master What matters is now and how you meet now how you manifest yourself now. And a lot of that has to do with letting go letting go of anything it gets in the way of just being here. Some people find the path of letting go very meaningful.

Partly because it's a path that most directly sometimes frees the religious life from involvement with metaphysics and supernatural beliefs of variety, different kinds. And religion often has, you know, all kinds of supernatural beliefs that are built into it. When the emphasis main emphasis is on non clinging, where you know, non clinging, you know, because clinging is painful, that little movement from or big movement from clinging to non clinging doesn't require any supernatural belief. So the path of non clinging and some people specialize in this just that's all you do. Just let go let go let go. Sometimes, though, some people find it meaningful for some people, it's not helpful to do it, because maybe they can't let go so easily. I've been, I think guilty of basically telling that to people, you know, when I was first first starting to be a teacher, sometimes just someone would come to me with their difficulties and challenges and, and I would, you know, help, you know, try to be helpful for sure. But basically I'd say something like, Oh, just let go. And, and then I had kids and family, you know this and then and then I realized, wait, you know, it's not that easy, you know, there's it's more complicated, more involved in you know, all the different you know. And so, you know, so it's it can be overly simplistic that teaching or just let go let go and it doesn't understand doesn't respect the complexity of life's and complexities of our own minds and all that. It also discouraged discouraging for some people because or undermine some people Because sometimes when you have a really strong emphasis on just spirituality of just of non clinging, people get the impression that they're not allowed to develop themselves in any way. Because that's too goal oriented, that's too dualistic, or a variety of different things people will say. And so it's not okay to develop one's patience. It's not okay to cry to work on one's anger. So in person, you don't you don't get so angry so much anymore. So it's okay to develop yourself that self help go to the Self Help section and bookstore then if you want that, but you know, Buddhism, that's about something more profound, non dualistic, immediate here, and now just let go. And, and we won't, but we were worried about your anger. And so, sometimes, you know, people feel undermined or feel like you know, they're not, you know, some of the very basic ordinary capacities of growth and development and maturation aren't given any respect in that. It system. So the third understanding of the path and that you see in Buddhism is the path of no path. In some ways, maybe not so different from the path of letting go. But the path of no path you don't even let go. It's sometimes the emphasis here is just on being just be, just be as it is, sometimes a variety of this kind of just Notepad. It's enough just to be mindful. That a moment of mindfulness and clear mindfulness that itself is freedom right there. Freedom is not to be attained in the future, some future retreats and future developmental time. But freedom is found in a moment of unobstructed nonreactive mindfulness, right here and now. Or sometimes the path of no path is couched in the language of non dualism, than any kind of idea of being dualistic. There's a there's a there's a goal and a means to the goal is dualistic. There's me and I, there's I and me practicing that's dualistic. There is attainments being non attainment, that's a dualistic thing, videos to kind of just drop all at all dualism and realize a non dualistic presence. The focus on non path. Sometimes you find people emphasizing the present moment is perfect, just the way it is that somehow you wake up. And so the emphasis is waking up.

Sometimes you find in this non path path, that occasionally you'll find that they rely a lot more on teachers, because you need a teacher to wake you up and your teacher to point you to point out the place of non dualism, the place of no attainment, the place of no path, and so sometimes so you develop a very charismatic teachers then who in their charisma and their power or something in their presence, people kind of like get jolted or get kind of something different happens to them, that they

kind of experience something that's immediate and present here. And now I have no known people who have relied on teachers like that, with a hammer, keep having to go back. They don't have a path. They don't there's no path, there's no practice. There's nothing to do, but, but you have to get it, whatever it is, and it's hard to know what it is. Exactly, because it's not anything. And, and some people get it, which is, you know, genuinely I'm not saying it's not real, but some people do. I've known people who keep going back to get a hit. And they they keep coming back that take a hit from the charismatic teacher points to it something the non path is it Beautiful teaching. It's sometimes said that the not that teaching from the point of view there's no path of non dualism or something like that is teaching is pointing or describing the world, from the point of view of how a Buddha would see it. You know, someone who's finished the path, there's no more path to go. And so you see, without any greed, hate and delusion, you see, without any being caught by anything. And so in that not being caught by anything, there's a kind of a way in which things seem perfect. Not that there aren't problems in the world that are addressed. But there's no contraction. There's no resistance in the mind to being present for these things. And so because there's no resistance in the field of awareness, and everything happens in the field of awareness. There's a feeling somehow of perfection, fullness or completion that's here. The path of no path, little bit like the path of non clinging points, sometimes very powerfully and beautifully. To presence full, immediate immediacy of now, and the vitality, the fullness. And rather than the kind of life becomes Technicolor, whereas the path of development sometimes can be black and white because the goal isn't too far in the future. The path of development, sometimes you find teachers who emphasize then a lot, a lot of techniques, you try this technique, you do this here, you do that here, you develop the whole repertoire of techniques that you hold on to the path of letting go the path of neuropathy. They almost kind of want to write dismissive techniques, because techniques get in the way of that sense of immediacy, immediate presence right here, right now. And some people have a more easy access to a powerful sense of vital immediacy. Some people, it's not so easy to feel that in a meaningful way, maybe because their suffering is so great, or because their inner mental life is so strong, that it obscures the sense of immediacy and vitality and presence that can feel very rich and alive. Some people can can can experience a sense of meaningful immediacy, after a silent meditation retreat, going into retreat for a week or something. So much of the mental the proliferation of mental abstract thinking and planning and memories and preoccupations fall away. And as those fall away the sense of vitality of a lightness of presence have now become stronger, usually in a calmer, more meaningful way. And then we leave the retreat, and we pick up our concerns again, and pretty soon those concerns It's become like filters over eyes that we don't really see clearly anymore.

So some people have easier access for I don't know, whatever reason to sense of immediacy, that's it's very meaningful. They feel alive. There's nothing that's needed. There's no other sense of deep trust in life. Because just just to be alive is enough. Nothing has to happen. We're not attained anything. And some people for whatever reason, really, that's meaningful. They have a deep trust in the Dharma, deep trust in the practice or the deep trust in just awareness being aware. Other people, you teach them the path of no path, and they flounder because their minds their attachments, they're caught up in this their suffering is just kind of swirling around, they're caught in it and kind of what they're hearing is just accepted. There's nothing you can do. You know, you're you're diluted, you're you're dualistic, you know, and you know, just you know, and you know, you know, just get over it. And, and relax. And trust in some deep way. And, or something like so some people that just like, you know, just they feel like they're hitting their head against the wall or they're just perplexed, they don't understand what's being talked about. And so sometimes, so there's three paths, path of cultivation, the path of letting go and the path of no path. There all three I think, are quite beautiful. They both have their strengths and their weaknesses. And, and I like to think of it is that different phases of people's lives, different ones stand out. At different phases of practice. If you could follow the developmental path. There. There are times when clearly you're cultivating something. And there's clearly a times when mostly what you're doing is

letting Go. And that's the phase of development you're in. And then other times where you realize that it doesn't make any sense to even like go there. What's required now in your practice is just a very clear presence being present for things being, rather than doing just being present. And then that changes. And then you have to do something else. You go, bam, you go back to development. These can be over over months and years, you might go in and out of these different things, or different times different ones get emphasized. It could be that when you go to work, that the most useful thing for you to do at work is to cultivate and develop your capacity for patients with your boss. And that's how the world is best served. But perhaps when you go home, maybe the best thing to sit down to meditate, the best thing to do in your meditation is just to be and not to do anything just to have no path, no concern for a goal. Just to be And perhaps when you, you know, in other situations in life, it's best to practice letting go, letting go letting go, maybe. So I'm reluctant to, to position any of these three understandings of the path against each other. And to claim that one is the right way or the true way. And the only way and the others are somehow wrong or diluted or something, I think it's wise is to see them as being partners in the in this whole approach, and as partners at different times different phases, different situations in life, different ones in them. Take prominence as a teacher as trying to teach something as a Buddhist teacher. I would like people to have the sense that there is cultivation and development and growth there is a path there is a place to go and practice it can lead someplace beautiful. That's not where you're right back right now. Hey, At the same time, I'd like to convey the tremendous richness and value of presence here now, that just this moment of mindfulness here is beautiful and profound. And be able to hold those together and now to one against the other, which I see sometimes in in Dharma circles. And so the analogy that I like to give for this is probably maybe I apologize, I've given this here recently is that of going for a walk on a mountain trail. And there's you can walk on the trail for different purposes. You can go for a walk, just to enjoy the walk. And if you just go out there to enjoy the walk, then getting to the end of the path, the end of the trail is not really the point of the walk, you know, you're out there to enjoy the dista enjoy the walk. And so you kind of race through the forest race through the mouth and to get to the other end as quickly as you can not noticing anything. You know, that's not the point.

The point And just to walk and maybe in a leisurely pace and just enjoy what you see and the experience of walking in other way of walking the mountain trail is to get to the other place. Maybe it's important to get there. That's all that's important. And so then getting there as quickly as you can is what's important. And so you walk fast and safely, hopefully, and but you just can, you know, it doesn't really matter what you see around you. What matters is you get there, quickly. Depending on what we're doing in life, sometimes it's enjoying the view, and sometimes it's getting someplace. But the two don't have to be opposed. Also, it's possible to walk along the path to get to the end of the trail, and to enjoy the walk as you walk. And that's kind of like what I like to emphasize. I'd like to see you know that as we as we engage in the practice of Buddhism as we engage the practice of mindfulness It's possible to do both at the same time, it's possible to appreciate the immediacy of presence, the immediacy of mindfulness and enjoy it and enjoy each step along the way of our life. By being fully here and the immediacy of now. And at the same time appreciate that as we do that we're on a path that's onward leading, that's going on to greater freedom, to greater growth and development for us. So we become people who have more to offer this world of ours. I think this world has a tremendous need for people who are not so neurotic and who have developed their capacity for being more peaceful, more free of conflict with themselves and the world around them, so that we can be more generous and compassionate and caring for everyone that we encounter in this world of ours. So three notions of the path three, three approaches to the path. I hope that's just one path and three different lanes. So enjoy your path. Thank you.