

## Right Action

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And so, kind of impactful for me to hear that this man George, who I know, has disappeared this way. And the A and T at T adds to two other, I guess, phone calls I received today about one person who is dying and is also part of our community, or may be close to dying, or something like that. And maybe she'll be in hospice, maybe needs help, but maybe not. And someone else who also apparently I don't remember, I don't recognize the name, but someone else who apparently comes to here, called from the hospital, asking for support, and help. And so, in terms of that topic for the talk tonight, maybe it's kind of nice. It nice is my not word, but appropriate introduction, because there are times, time to time, when something occurs where we feel the preciousness of people and the preciousness of life, and we somehow identify more strongly with people's circumstances, and usually does something to our hearts, to us.

Sometimes it makes us feel alarmed and afraid and angry or something. And sometimes it opens us to compassion and caring for each other. And it's one of, you know, if held the right way, or held a certain way, it's one of the things that helps us feel our common humanity and our common caring for each other. And as I understand the way that Buddhist practice unfolds, surely my practice as it's unfolded is that it's really inseparable from my connection to the people around me. And the practice I've done has helped me appreciate more and more the depth of a preciousness in that connection, the preciousness of people, the value of life. And something about the nature of how it is that, for me, at times where I lose that connection, and I don't feel it, and how I can feel disconnected from the others, and more importantly, disconnected from the caring for others, of compassion, and feeling the preciousness and love for people.

And I think that one of the opportunities or possibilities of a practice like this, it's not just, you know, to get calm or to feel more peaceful and resolved about our own issues, but rather

to help live a life that we're living, a life for the welfare of all beings. We feel connected to all beings, we feel the importance of all beings. And so the topic for the talk was to talk about right action. And because on Monday night I'm giving a series of talks now on the Eightfold Path, and now that today is a topic is called right action, which seems a little bit maybe the abstract. You know, right action can include almost anything, but what it specifically refers to is the right action. Right here, means appropriate or helpful or wise, that action which, in our relationships to other people, which is compassionate and supports the welfare and well-being of all beings, and all beings including ourselves.

And so that's kind of, you know, that's kind of how it's understood, the basic element of right action. But it's part of the full path, and the Eightfold Path is more the path of practice that leads to liberation, leads to profound peace. And so what's, I think, very significant is the way these two are closely connected, that our caring for others, our compassionate connection to others, a concern for the welfare of all, is inseparable from our own walking the path and becoming free. It's not one or the other. It's not that you can put aside your care for other people and then expect to become free yourself. In fact, if we are selfishly involved in the practice, it's all but for me that goes diametrically opposed to the very movement of the heart that liberation and freedom is about.

And so right action as part of the path is usually described as three kinds of action, or actually it's usually defined in the negative, mostly. And that is avoiding killing or harming other living beings, avoiding taking what's not given, and avoiding misusing sexuality. So those three things are the kind of key things. These are kind of like the big three for our social relationships. These kind of three things cause a tremendous amount of harm in the world. Used to have to read the newspapers to get a sense of that.

And you know, three phone calls to think three things today of people in distress. And it's, you know, I've met so many people as a teacher, and heard their stories and what goes on with them that I'm pretty enough. Confidence, the right word. But I kind of confidently assume that a big percentage of you who are here today have had horrible things happen to you. Really great difficulties have happened to you. And probably they happen because someone was not doing one of them, was doing one, you know, was doing one of those things, were involved in actively harming, I guess, haven't been killed yet. But you know, you've been harmed or hurt in physical ways, people have taken from you what's not given in some way, and people have probably been involved with some sexual misconduct. Or maybe you have been involved in such a way that someone was deeply, deeply hurt by this.

The levels a number of people in our society have been raped are quite dramatic, and it's

not just women. I have a good friend who, well, when he was eighteen, he was raped, and he said that when it happened, he knew at that moment his life had been changed forever. And so many people like that. And so to remember that this is part of our life, these kinds of things. I don't think that Buddhist spirituality is meant to just put a pretty face on life, and it's assumed that everything is beautiful and wonderful. And if we can just kind of meditate and live in a cloud of loving kindness and peace, and you know, just everything should be, you know, just a delight. I think that we would be poor people because of that, if that's all it was about. I think that the depth of who we are wouldn't be accessible or give expression, and so the fullness of who we are.

And so one of the words that's connected to ethics, or this right action, is integrity. And I think, I think integrity is such a beautiful word. I don't know how other people feel that way. It's a much more beautiful word than ethics, which should be a beautiful word. But, you know, I don't get, you know, automatically excited by ethics. And when I was younger, I, you know, learned and such a, you know, I had no interest in being ethical. You know, it wasn't that I was unethical at all. I was a pretty ethical person. But it wasn't like I was at problems with ethics exactly in the conventional understanding of it, of, you know, being ethical. But people talked about being ethical. I would shut down or think that was kind of silly or kind of puritanical or something. It just wasn't a kind of a concept that, you know, that was attractive to a hippie like me.

And so the word integrity, I think it's beautiful, maybe because, you know, it comes from the word in one, you know, to be one, to be whole, to be integral. And so this beautiful capacity we have to become whole, to heal the ways in which we're divided, heal the ways we're fragmented. Many people are divided against themselves. You know that there are people who are at war with different parts of themselves. They have parts that they don't like, they feel are wrong, they feel ashamed of, and so they attack it. They push it away. They argue with it. They try to recoil from it. It's quite something, the inner world, inner war that some people feel.

And you know, I think any time that we're unethical, we're divided from ourselves because we can't be, it is not integrity. Then we're not whole any time that we are selfish. Oddly enough, you think someone is selfish, all about myself. You know that. Maybe you're humble. It's all about you. But there's an odd paradox that the more selfish you are, the less whole you are, the less complete you can be. And so to become complete is to have a capacity, part of what? To feel and have empathy for the wider world, and to recognize what's all happening there, what's going on in the world, and to meet it, and be willing to meet it and hear it. And I think

it's a beautiful thing.

So I tell someone told me a story of being on retreat, and that he was maybe he came into the retreat little retreat hall, meditation hall, maybe a little bit before everybody else or some other people. And I guess he was looking and watching what people are doing or something. But he noticed this woman near him came to take her seat, and there was a pile, a little pile of meditation cushions, kind of in a window box kind of place that, you know, it seemed pretty clear to him. They were not claimed as part of the retreat center. They had extra cushions and stuff, but they were in a place they weren't usually at. So she went over there and took a cushion. He watched her go take a cushion, bring it back to a seat, and sit down. And then he watched her get up and return the cushion, and then go out to the place where this retreat center had cushions, you know, like a big pile of cushions in little shelves that mentioned everybody was clearly offered to everyone, everyone could take. And then she took one of those and came back with that. And he was so impressed by that integrity.

In fact, it wasn't obvious to her that the ones in the window sill were freely given. You know, there might have been someone else, and so she had. So I guess she had some doubts, and so she went and returned it. And so that's beautiful. I think it's beautiful to have that kind of care and sensitivity. But it was also beautiful was the man who saw it. Was moved by that. That was really meaningful to me, into who someone will have that kind of care with their integrity, with their ethics, and not to cause harm or not to take what's not given. And so I don't dissimilar, but the story was very meaningful for me.

The first time I did a poster retreat, one of these kinds of retreats that we do was a very long retreat. Comparatively, it was, you know, ten weeks long. And that's long enough to get your ethics in order somewhat. It's very hard to do this kind of practice here without getting your ethics in order. So I should be warned about that. So if you have no interest whatsoever in being ethical and you're kind of opposed to the very idea of becoming an ethical person, this practice is probably not for you, because if we're probably, you know, going to undermine your wish to be unethical. But especially if you go on a long retreat, I mean, that'll really do it in your wish to be unethical, because the longer you sit on retreat, the more you face yourself, the more you become interesting, more you become whole, the more you know you just can't. It's not possible, you know, in retreat, when you say it's not possible to keep the divisions, the fragmentations, to hold things at bay. It's not possible to stay selfish. And so you not kind of opens up and opens up.

And so I was sitting this long retreat. I don't know why I wasn't. I don't know how long I've been sitting there, six weeks or something. And I remembered this woman who just before

the retreat that I had lust for, and so I was thinking about her, and I just couldn't generate any lust. And what I felt instead was this kind of beautiful clarity, and maybe not of purity. Also, skin hippies sometimes didn't like purity, like me, didn't care for it much, the word, but a kind of purity of heart, a purity of the mind, a cleanliness, a clarity. And I certainly valued this woman. I thought she was wonderful, and appreciated her, you know, just as much as I had before. But there was something about the lust that I had for her that just didn't seem right any more. Just, you know, just why would I pick that up? Why would I get involved in that when there was this beautiful state of mind at heart there that felt much more open and had a much greater sense of integrity there.

And, you know, it just was obvious in that state. You know, of course I wouldn't act on that. Of course I wouldn't even want to have those feelings because of the contrast between how good I felt now. You know, if I had not gone on retreat and instead lived a stressed life and running around doing a lot of things, being stressed out, lust might have felt like a relief. And you know, why should I give up my lust? It's a better thing, all this pleasure, and I'm having a time, and it seems good, and you know whatever. You know, it's difficult in moments of stress or preoccupation. And when we don't have this integrity, it's sometimes easy not, you know, to operate on intentions that at other times, when we feel more settled and integral, that we wouldn't act on. So this is not, you know, puritanical things, not a rule-based thing. Not saying, you know, don't have, don't act, or don't have lust, as if lust is a bad thing. And no one was telling me that. It was an internal shift of feeling in a sense, how I felt, how I experienced myself, I experienced this life. That shifted for me. And that's what told me, This I don't want to do. This kind of activity doesn't feel right any more.

So this inner, and so that really surprised me at the time, and I was so surprised. But in this, it wasn't just with lust. It was just an ethical behaviour in general that I just felt coming out of this long retreat, this tremendous sense of ethical purity or a clear intention that I had during that retreat. I wish I could tell you that. It just continued beautifully after the retreat, and, you know, just was set for, you know, but a you know, it's a different, that is, the effects of retreat can wear off. Or to say it differently, maybe a nicer way, the sense of intimacy and connectedness and settledness that supports ethical life kind of faded away after the retreat. And so it took a while to try to build again, for me, the So right action, right ethical behaviour is an important part of this practice of the Eightfold Path. And it's, as I said, it's defined by not killing, not stealing, and not engaging in sexual misconduct.

And some people protest, You know, this is just negative. You know, this negative spirituality, negative rules, just what you shouldn't do. And they want something inspiring. And so I've

known people who try to reword these kinds of teachings to be positive. They say, I want, I don't want to live, but I do want to be negative. So I'm not going to live by this idea of not killing. I'm going to be devoted to living compassionately. Or, I don't care this thing about not taking what's not given. I'm going to live generously. That's what I'm going to live and now. But it's not so clear what it means to be compassionate. It's, you know, you know, not exactly. I mean, the behaviour of compassion is not so clear. The behaviour of generosity is not so clear what it should be. But it's pretty clear. The behavior of not killing, you know, you mean kind of generally, you know. If you know whether you're causing harm, you're intending harm or not. Don't intend harm. You know if you're taking something that's not given. You know if you're stealing. Generally, if you don't know you're stealing, you technically wouldn't be stealing in Buddhism, because you have to know and have intention to steal. So it's relatively clear. Learn guidelines for what it is, and so you know, this clarity of it. And if we lived in a phenomenally better world, if those three things are lived by, not killing, not stealing, and no sexual misconduct, I mean, the world would just be a totally different place if that. It's pretty, because of the tremendous impact it would have on this world. They're really profound things that we shouldn't overlook, the value of it and what they have.

All three have in common, in what Buddhist ethics, I think, is the fundamental principle for Buddhist ethics is, Don't cause harm. And so as we, and Don't cause harm is not meant to be a rule, you know, like, you know, Thou shalt not cause harm. But it's really meant in Buddhism, I think, as a mirror, as a pointer to a capacity inside ourselves to be integral, to be whole, to be settled, to be in touch with our inner purity, or Buddha nature, or empathy, or wholeness, or connectedness, or intimacy, or inner purity and cleanliness, or something that's beautiful inside, inner beauty, to be connected to our inner beauty. And one of the ways that I've been taught, I was taught when I was a new Buddhist student about the precepts, things like these things, is to not take them as a rule-based, but take them as guidelines that become really interesting when you're about to violate them. And so they are kind of like mindfulness bells. A mindfulness bell is a bell that rings. And when it rings, you stop and are mindful and see what's going on. So when you are about to kill someone or about to harm someone intentionally, that's a really good time to stop and pay attention. If you are about to steal, that's a really good time. Or be deceitful or fraudulent. We know all kinds of one considered taking what's not given. That's a really good time to stop and be mindful. And if you're about to engage, what's in any kind of basis considered sexual misconduct? No matter whose rules, whose puritanical rules they are, if you know if it's anybody in your neighborhood's rule idea of what is sexual misconduct, don't start off by protesting their fundamentalist, whatever. Use it as a mindfulness bell. You know, I'm about to break my neighbor's precept, and if

they're uptight, whatever, and let's use that as a mindfulness bell. I know places where they pay a lot of money to have someone ring a mindfulness bell, and now, so I'll just use that as a free one. So that we can look and stop at our sexual behaviour and understand it, look at it more deeply.

And no matter how uptight and puritanical some on sexual mores are, I think everyone can spend more time looking and being mindful of their sexuality. How many people you know are really, really wise about sexuality, really worked it out, really well, have studied it deeply, understand it really well, all the ins and outs of sexual behaviour. And you know, a lot of people like that. We have a society. We have like national heroes, you know, that are like the sexually wise beings who, you know, have gone through the ringer, and we all hold them up in great esteem. I mean, we should have people like that, right? Because I mean, what can be, what is more central to being human beings, most human beings, to have some relationship to sexuality? Even asexual people have a relationship to sexuality that's important for them. And you know, it's an amazing amount of time and behaviour people spend around thinking about and acting on and doing things, having to do with sexuality. And you know, people spend more time, I suspect that people spend more time focusing on what they're dressing, you know, based on, you know, some kind of sexual interest or attraction or something, than probably almost any other reason for how we dress except maybe comfort. I don't know. So anyway, it's a big thing, I think, right? So shouldn't we have national heroes? Shouldn't we have people of society recognize people who've kind of gone through the ringer and really understood it really well, and we can go sit at their feet and say, You know, can you tell us about, you know, how this works and how to be wise? And rather, we have pop stars and we have Lady Gaga, and we have, you know, sport stars and people like that who are our cultural heroes. And so I don't know.

So the idea that of using any kind of reminder to stop and look and question what our sexuality, executive behaviour, interests, desires are, and look at it more deeply, it's my assumption that sexual activity and sexual attraction between people, sexual behaviour is probably the most complex form of sexual communication and interaction and relationship that exists for human beings. It probably has more layers, more elements, more the aspects of our psychology come into play than probably any other thing. It's probably, I think, any pretty much any sexual relationship is multi-multi-dimensional. What's going on in that relationship, in that sexual behaviour. It's not like, Just go for the pleasure, or It's not just go for gratification. It's not just for, Let's express my love. You know, it's a lot, a lot of things. And so I think it's a really rich area to stop and be mindful for.

So this idea that these precepts, to the usual definition of right action is the first three precepts, is, again, not to take them as hard and fast rules, though sometimes it's very useful to do that, but rather to take them as mindfulness bells to stop and look. What about what I am about to do? And is it possible that in my intention to violate one of these precepts, is it possible that I am hurting something, to hurt someone? Is it possible that I've lost touch with some place inside of me that I want to live from? Do we know some place inside of me that's that valuable, that you really want to live from that place? Not values like the value of not killing as a value, but the clarity and purity of heart that is a concealing place, that if you live from that feeling place, of course you wouldn't harm someone. Of course you wouldn't want to harm someone, because it's, you know, just that's not possible in that place.

In the teachings of the Buddha, it's said that someone who attains to the first level of spiritual maturity in Buddhism called stream entry, that after that they're incapable of breaking the precepts. They're incapable of intentionally killing someone, stealing, lying, engaging in sexual misconduct, and intoxicating themselves. And that's a pretty powerful statement when we know that so many people in our society struggle with these issues. Whether it's some people really wrestle, a struggle, sometimes only struggle, they kind of succumb to these powerful temptations that cause them to violate in order to break these precepts and to come to a place, a kind of transforming place, where you can no longer cross that line. Again, not because of a rule, because of some inner feeling, inner place, integrity that just can't be crossed is quite a remarkable capacity to human beings. I have to get to that place.

So when I was thinking of coming down here, thinking about giving this talk, I wanted to say something, make the talk really simple, because it was, I thought this is a really profound topic, and so it's so profound that only it really deserves simple, something simple. If it's not simple, then it's not profound enough. And I got to got astray with the announcement, and it became a kind of, for me, it became kind of an extemporaneous reflection. Wasn't what I intended, but it's the simple thing that I wanted to try to say is that, I guess, would be two things. One is that you cannot become free yourself if you are involved in intentional harm for another, if your behavior in some way or other is causing harm for others, you can't become free yourself. That's the one simple thing. So a degree to it's becoming free, liberated as motivation, used to keep that in mind. The other is that if you do things selfishly, you can also not become free. And the connection is that I believe one of the primary motivations, or one of the primary elements involved in breaking the precepts, cause of doing things that cause harm to others, is selfishness, just thinking about yourself and your own needs, your own desires, your own, you know, thing. And so it's not possible to become free if we're selfish.



And so the ways in which Buddhist practice focuses on ourselves a lot, it's focusing ourselves in such a way that it's meant to free us from selfishness, free us from that contraction and holding that that entails.

Ka: So that's what I had to say, and we have ten minutes. So this is, again, I think this is a very important topic, and it always makes me, I always very much appreciate when people grapple with these issues in their lives. I don't have a simple answer sometimes to how people grapple, how important this is for people, but it means a lot to me that people are really interested in this. Sometimes people come to me and say, You know, I have termites in my house. What do I do? And I don't want to tell them what to do, because, you know, the question for Buddhists it would be, Should I kill them? Right, and I don't want to say what they should do. But I really appreciate that people are asking those questions that, to me, is meaningful, that have that sensitivity, that prompts them to question rather than, you know, automatically killing the termites. So, if anybody has any topics, yes, please see if you can. Barbara, can you bring them over there? The mike there, Nerali. Nayeli, your hand. Thank you so much for the help, too.

So you said that there are two things to be considered about. The first is not to overtly be harmful to others, and the second is to not be selfish if you want to be free, if you like, assuming you want to be free. So I grapple with the second one quite a bit, and since a few years it's just like the precepts thing. So I love to hear that. So much grappling with that makes me happy. And since a few years it can be honest, it can be painful. It can be difficult, I know. But I am very happy to hear it, because it's so epidemic, selfishness. And so to hear if someone has the interest and motivation to grapple with it, it's really great. Yes, hahahaha.

So the question is, like, one aspect of it that I also think about is self-compassion. And like, just as I don't want to be selfish, I also don't want to be selfish to an extent where I am violent to myself. Yes, of course that's not. That's not good either. So to find that discernment between not being selfish and yet being kind to oneself has often been in several, like, situation, real situations of my life. That has been a question that has come up, and I'm not sure if I've been able to behave in a mature, mindful way. So I don't know. I hope there is, like, some technique or some clear answer around this.

Er, I don't know the answer, the answer. I wish I had an answer. I think that the, you know, my understanding so far, my limited understanding of people and myself is that it's really great to be on the path. It's really wonderful to have that interest to practise. Try to work with these things. And sometimes there are no easy answers, and or there are any. There is an easy answer, but we don't know what it is in this circumstance, and so we do our best

we can, and then we try to learn from that. And so I think what's the refuge is knowing your basic intention. What are the values? Is the intention, what are you trying to do? And you don't know what the right approach is. Then fall back and ask, What is your intention? What are what's most important that you want to come from? What's values? What's the guideline that you have for trying to find an answer?

And in terms of the right action, one of the guidelines the Buddha gave is to be concerned for the welfare of all. And I know in more modern English, I think some people say the greater good and the welfare of all include yourself. We don't leave ourselves out. So what is good for everyone? What's the greater good for the whole thing? And if you can come back, that's really what I'm looking for. I don't know how to do it. I have other motivations going on. But take refuge in that. And then we try to find our way, and you know, it's not easy in some circumstances to find that way, but both with selfishness and unhealthy selflessness.

Oh, if I, if you're doing mindfulness practice where you turn and really are mindful inside internally for your what's going on in your body, your mind, and heart. Really pay attention carefully, deeply. Can I get by the, get behind the concepts you have. You're trying to live by to what it actually feels like to be selfish, what it actually feels like to be self-effacing this kind of way. Or, you know, you both circus circumstances. You probably find that something is off. So if you're being selfless in an inappropriate way, then if you're being that inner sensitivity that comes from mindfulness, you'll feel that it's off. Something's wrong here, and that becomes a guideline, Oh, or if it feels right, you'll feel that it's right. Sometimes being selfless is right, and it feels that way. And so I've found over and over again that the, that the tuning in to my inner life, tuning into my body, my emotions, my mind, my thoughts is a great guideline. It teaches me the felt sense of it all. Teaches me when something is off and when something isn't. That makes some sense. Yes, definitely helps. Thank you.

My question is really similar, but it's opposite. In the sense that, yes, often I have the problem that I am too selfless, and so, you know, maybe sometimes I will want to help someone who actually is hurting me. Or I had this friend who was always coming to me, you know, when she was sad, and that at one time I was sad. And so she said, How are you? Oh, I'm sad, I said. And she said, Oh, I'm sad too. And then she said, talking about how sad she was, and then after I had to force myself to not talk to her, because I was really in a bad moment in my life, and I needed all the energy, you know, that I could, that I had, and so I felt so guilty. So maybe my compass is a little off, because when I take care of myself, I feel such a big guilt about, you know, taking care of myself, especially when that hurts others. Because, you know, she was, you know, trying to contact me because she was so sad, and I couldn't. I couldn't bring

myself to keep listening to her when I was struggling so much. But I felt really guilty about it. So I don't know if ever an answer. So guilt. So what wisdom do you have about guilt? Do you have any wisdom about it?

Yes, I don't know. Well, usually I use it as a compass. If I feel guilty, I must be doing something wrong. Oh, so you believe it. So a part of what you say, you believe you are guilty. Yes, oh yes, I know what? And where did you learn to give your guilt so much authority? Oh, I think you know I was raised in Italy where people are more about like we're all kind of self-effacing and worrying about other people more. But very kind. You haven't, you really? You never drove in Italy. That's real. I don't know. So is the way I was raised. Maybe also, you know, I was raised Catholic. It's all about Yato. So some, I know, sometimes it's something by Catholicism where it lends itself for people. Sometimes people from Catholicism get the, somehow it imbues this idea to give their guilt a lot of authority. So what you think of that, all that authority, you give it that like I mean, now I feel better, like my life has become better since I started, you know, avoiding people who harm me, I guess. But at the same time, I still feel guilty about cause I don't know. I still have this instinct that if someone is sad, that I know about it, I should help, even though they wouldn't help me in the same situation? Yes, or So what I like to, what I'm trying to do is to suggest to you is maybe you could ask a question, the beliefs that are behind that, the belief that it's wrong to take care of yourself, and that in doing that, you know, someone maybe needs help. But to help them, and they somehow turn it around, so you feel worse afterwards. Is that really for the greater good in, you know? And so, you know, I think the Buddhist analysis often is to look at the greater good, and have that be the standard, as opposed to a simplistic idea of self and other, and, you know, who is to benefit the most, because you're important too. And sometimes people who have a lot of guilt sometimes have a certain kind of conceit that they're not important. Yes, really wise words. It isn't that very interesting to have that in one sentence, the conceit that you're not important. So you have a lot of interesting things to grapple with, you know? And they're, and they're, and they're really good things to grapple with. You have, you have really good partners, and you know where, as I said earlier, you some day we'll have these, you know, great wise sages of sexuality, and we'll look up to them. I think some day we'll have these great wise sages of guilt, and you'll be one of those great sages. And we'll go to you, and we'll bow to you out. You're, you've understood, you know. You're really sawed to the depth of guilt, and it's seen it through and through, and it won't bother you any more. And then we'll come and study with you. It's worthwhile. I would do it. Spend time. Look deeply. Okay, so thank you. And now.

And so, if any of you, I don't know if you want to talk to Michel about George, if any, especially if any of you are in the Outer South, must Description of Gone Ismael in Watfynere is fine. Anāiyo, talk to Michel afterwards, if you like, somehow, to go down there and visit the park, or put yourself on a list of people in case there's something else that we can do. I don't know what we can do, but it would be nice if our community could help. So any might. So thank you all very much for tonight.