

2017-02-05 Conditioning Factors For Change

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SPEAKERS

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So good morning, everyone. One of the I think important questions is how do we change? Excuse me? How do we change? For people involved in the spiritual life? How do we have spiritual change? How do we have personal change? Many people are looking to change something they're suffering, and they want to suffer less or not suffer at all. They feel dissatisfied with their life they're living and they want to change to something else. So how does change happen? The other unit by many answers to that question. But there are two two answers that are on my mind. One is through understanding. And to some degree, that's important part of insight meditation, because we're trying to see clearly and seeing to understand something. And the other way is by by how we're conditioned, the conditioning factors that affect us the impressions that we take in. And that's, that's what I want to talk about today. Because human minds can be shaped human hearts can be shaped can be conditioned. And if we don't somehow understand that, then we'll be conditioned by forces, which are not our choice. And so we can also be participate in their conditioning, and conditioning ourselves in a good way. So I thought of this topic, because a few days ago, I was talking with a group of people about perhaps in early conditioning I had. And then I started thinking about other conditioning. So I had that had an impact on me shaped me. And the contact content gives me free.

So in the context of the conversation I had, I was remembering that a very important experience I had as a child, and I don't know how old I was, but maybe I was eight, nine or so was laying in bed, going to sleep at night. And before I fell asleep, kind of through an active, I guess, in imagination, imagining that I was looking out into the universe. And I was looking deep into dark space. And there were just a few scattered stars here and there. And, for me, it was very comforting to have this view. And I would imagine what it'd be like to die. And I thought, and for me, I thought that when I die, that's it, I didn't think there was any continuation after death. However, the same time, I felt that when I die, I'm going home into that universe, it's kind of like return and I felt very happy like a homecoming. So I would have these you know, at night going to sleep periodically, these thoughts and these images, and it was kind of what is the comforting It was very meaningful because many years later, I remember those feelings I had the feeling of being at home and comfortable and safe. And it was associated with being in this universe. And I think that having that repeatedly said an impression on me. I beneficial one because when I started doing Buddhist practice, those memories came back and not just as memories but as of physical experience my body like myself, I'm a mirror of my bone. kind of knew this place of being at home in this universe like this was here. So that was kind of a conditioning factor is something that infected me in a nice way. I remembered kind of somewhat similar. Maybe around the same time maybe it's not a you know, separate so distinct from each other. visiting my grandparents house and being in bed in the morning, waking up and back in when I was you know, in Norway people sleep with wonderful down comforters. And I remember waking up and it was you know, light was coming in beautiful light was coming in through the window and we had these wooden beds and wooden shares

and it was kind of you'd kind of very simple. Nordic, little bedroom and me being under my comforter, and I'd be awake and I'd be reading Donald Duck magazines and my grandmother would come in to my bedroom, with toast with cheese on it. And I think I just kind of took it for granted at the time, I didn't think about it much. I just did this what was happening many years later, I said, you know, that was actually a very important experience, there was a feeling of being loved or being safe, being comforting, being here, that actually I think helped shape me in some way. And you know, I'd forgotten about it then. And for me, some of these wonderful things that happened to me as a child, were remembered, through my meditation practice, somehow by relaxing and settling it, it came back. But at the same time, growing up, I hit other conditioning factors that were not so good, right. So I mean, when I was maybe about seven, I saw that my only episode that I ever watched Twilight Zone, the people who are old enough in America, remember Twilight Zone. And it was a very scary TV show. And so I remember so I watched it only once in my whole life. But for that, for the next maybe many, many months, I will go to bed afraid, like, you know, was like something scary was going to happen, it was kind of on, you know, unsure what was going to happen. But it was whatever it was, was scary. So I remember going to bed afraid. Or when I was 14, living in Italy, out in this street, dark, dark street at night, and alone, and then a man comes by and I get attacked. And so being attacked on the street, that had a big impact on me. And the fear stayed with me for a long time. And the fear was particularly I didn't want to go back into town, we lived on the edges of town. So they were going back into town became scary for me. So there was a conditioning factor for me. And all those are the ones that are giving you examples of or ones where there was an impression put on me. So you know, in my marrow when my emotional body my sense, and it lingered and stayed with me.

Some of them some of the things that conditioning factors were more things that people said to me, and one that had no real physical impact on the impression on my, my being. But I just there was an authority figure who said it and so I just thought, Oh, that's how, you know, I didn't, I didn't feel strange about it. But oh, that's that's true then. And that was my seventh grade art teacher looked over my shoulder as I was doing art in the classroom and said, Gil, you have no art no artistic ability. You know, I didn't, I had no self identity is having, you know, no key, I didn't care. But having to stickability I didn't didn't ever occurred to me. And it just oh, that's the way the universe is built, then you'd have just matter of fact, and so I just took that, you know, it's the truth. So I carried with that without, I didn't have to feel bad about I just carried that with me until I got to college. And my roommate was, I don't think he'd call himself this, but maybe you get the sense. He was kind of a born again, artist. And so he kind of slowly worked on me. And by the end of my first year in college, I was taking art classes. And it turned out that I had some artistic ability. And so you know, what the impact of what someone said or, or, or when I was, I think was about 14 or 15. Also, I I went to a boarding school up in the mountains. And it was turned out I didn't know that until I got there. It was supposed to it was it was partly chosen because it's beautiful mountain area was skiing and stuff. turned out it was a reformed school. People were sent from there from other boarding schools because they had, so it was interesting, it was interesting place to be. And I was walking up in the mountain road with a friend and from school one day and he was older than me, I was 14 15 he was 17. And it was it was beautiful up in the mountains with blue sky and snow capped mountains and valleys below is quite impressive. And it was kind of a kind of environment where you would feel well, I felt kind of all kind of like, so I was walking on this amazing, natural setting. And I asked this question, you know, maybe innocent question welling up from inside. Why are we here? And my friend said, Don't be silly. And I felt shamed. I felt embarrassed. And something inside of me closed and not took a long time before that opened again. So I've had that experience of being embarrassed or shamed and like, you know, not going to open that part again. So all these things are conditioning factors. And so some are good conditions are beneficial and supportive. Some are not if we live And the memories of them in a certain way, we're reinforcing those things. So if we live in the memories of fear, we can be some ways it's been not anonymous, it's easy to

do, it's kind of like a natural course, you know, if it's strong impression, but we then are subtly or not so subtly reinforcing those conditions, you know, we're reminding ourselves to be afraid. And that's what goes in, if we can repeat the experience of being with our loving grandmother repeat, or even remembering those memories, that kind of conditions us or affects our us emotionally in a different way. And so the question is, what, what conditions do we want to have conditioning is shaping us. So part of Buddhist practice is to choose our conditions, be involved in helping create the right conditions, not try to manipulate the situation not to be overdo it. But we have some role involved. And if you don't, if you don't, not involved in choosing what impressions you have, what conditions what conditions you then just reality has lots of ideas for you. You know, you're just going to go along, and people around you, people are going to say things and do things and people are going to, you know, certain things will impact you and affect you. And it's quite powerful, you know, other cultural and societal influences that affect us and we take them in, you know, so who you choose to be spend time with, and the values they have and how they are. And so if you wish, someone who's angry a lot, and you know, it can affect you. And you know, especially if you participate in that, then it touches places where you easily get angry. And so you're kind of reinforcing that, that's a conditioning factor and to reinforce a certain way of being.

So to look at our conditioning, so one of the purposes of Buddhist practice, is not only to understand and to see, but to have conditioning, so that we don't just feel have a good experience, in and of itself, good meditation, but so that our meditation so that our experience, can affect us, can change us in some ways. And initially, it might be small things might be a small change, but the repeated impressions we get, make a difference for us. So sitting in meditation, and if you sit in meditation, and spend a lot of time thinking and planning and remembering, then the quality or the impact of those plantings, and those memories will have a certain impact on you. So if you're sitting in meditation, you know, constantly wanting something and you're in your thoughts are tightening and wanting, it kind of reinforces wanting, it keeps you maybe in your thoughts and imaginations and your desires. And that has a certain effect on you. If you relax your thinking mind, and don't get involved in thought so much, but rather, you're focusing on being settled, relax, comfortable feeling, you know, recognizing perhaps that you're in your bedroom meditating, and it's safe here and now. And it's comfortable, and you've had enough to eat and kind of take in the kind of goodness of the moment that that can affect you very differently. So part of the function of meditation is to have certain kind of well being ease, safety, confidence, openness, that can you know, begin to change something. And that is very important to realize, because it's, it's not something we have a role in creating the right conditions, the right impressions for us. But it has a very different way of changing us than us being the agent of change, I have to understand something, I have to figure something out, I have to kind of engineer and organize everything just to be the right way. There has to be a sense of receptivity, there has to be some kind of willingness to be open and receptive to something that's good. If you're out walking around and a very, very cold night, and you're freezing, and you've come to your home and you look through the window and from outside and someone has the fireplace on, so that's great. You're so cold. So if you stand outside the window looking in at the fireplace burning, that's nice. You know, it's pretty, it's a nice view and you know, something But it's not going to help you get warm, you have to go inside to the or the fireplaces and stand there and be close enough to receive the heat the body has to take it in. So the same thing with impressions in our life, to allow them to take the lead What's good, come in, take a time for it. Now, the suggestion I have is that most of us have many more good impressions coming in, then we've taken time to feel and take in. Sometimes people are anxious, sometimes people have full of desires and ambitions and plans they want to do and busy and important things to happen. Some people are lost in fantasy in their mind. And so whatever it is, they are so busy, that they don't take the time to relax, and be aware of the body fullness, body fullness, mindfulness, and take in the goodness of this. So it can have an impression. So it can change us, it takes time to do this, you know, we have to give a give a certain kind of time to take this in, like this, this is how it is. If the mind is kind of

continuously planning, or thinking, we don't have time to feel to take it in. But as we take it in, something begins to shift and change. Something relaxes, something thaws something opens, there's a message that can come in to the kind of the marrow of our bone, message of goodness message of maybe feeling confident or safe or comfortable. Or since a well being in this world. That's hard to have if we spent time spinning out in fear and anxiety.

And, you know, our attention goes into thinking this idea of how we are conditioned by things. And that's important part of our life is presented in the Buddha with the idea of the four nutritionally called the four nutriments, the four foods, so the four nutriments of life for human beings. And so it's interesting list. And the first is edible food. That's obvious, right? The second is contact, the this experience direct experience we can have of the world. The third is intentions, intentions that we have. And the fourth is consciousness, knowing how we know things. So those are four, so food, sense contact, intention and consciousness. The first one is edible food. It means to really look at physically how it's nutriment for us, but to some degree, the associations we have with it, how we experience it, the direct experience of food, and not just a taste of it. But you know, if you know, there's a particular kind of Norwegian, she's the kind of cheese my grandmother gave me, is called, it's a kind of brown goat cheese, which is kind of like the national food of Norway, it's kind of like, you know, higher class, you know, kind of like peanut butters in America, but a little bit higher class, if you're Norwegian. And for me to have this round go cheese is comfort food, I have all these associations with it. So yes, my grip, like my grandmother's here again, you know, this is nice. I try to give this my American friends this go cheese, and I still haven't met I think any friends who's willing to do more than a small little taste of it, it's not comforting for them. So but oftentimes food have associate it's not just the experience of it, the direct experience of it comes to the filter of our perceptions, our memories, our ideas of it. And certain foods can help do more for us than just be you know, physically, you know, do you know, good, good physical food. So the second thing is the sense contact, and the whole sensory, sensory experience. And many, many things that we do have cut, you know, maybe everything that we experienced directly comes through our senses. And what do we allow to come into our senses, what comes into our senses, what comes into our senses can have a conditioning factor. If the if the sense experience coming in that sense, the environment we're in is scary, agitating. That has conditioned us in some way, maybe one little time, you can kind of shake it off and leave it behind. But if it's constant over and over and over again, it begins kind of lingering and stuff. Staying and shaping was so becomes kind of a lingering habit or a lingering kind of impression or view that we have of how we are. So what are the sense impressions that we allow ourselves to take in. I mean, sometimes the ordinary everyday, good impressions can have very nice effect on us. If you come out of your house in the morning, and it's a beautiful day, beautiful, clear, blue sky, or some kind of weather that you're like, if you can take the time to feel that and sense it and be with it, rather than looking out in the street and saying, you know, my car is kind of old, and my neighbor has, you know, a Tesla, you know, and, you know, I wonder how I should get a Tesla and I should get, you know, and I need to get a better job, and then the job I have, you know, and then I should save some money, and I have to figure this out, and I'm having trouble with my finances, and someone didn't really raise me properly, and I better do some therapy, that train of thought, whatever, whatever impression or conditioning factor that puts on you, I can decide for yourself. But what you've lost out on is the chance to kind of feel that, oh, at this moment, in this place, at this time, there's a feeling of just things are in place, things are right, the sun is shining, the sky is blue. That's nice, isn't that nice?

And something takes we take we take something in sitting and meditating just the good fortune you have. I mean, not many people in the world don't have at the good fortune of sitting down and meditating, closing your eyes, and breathing in a relaxed way that can that get that can be a very nice, sense experience you can take in, if you're able to stay present for it, the rhythm of breathing, but the mind wanders off hydrotherapy, I got to get a Tesla, you know, come back, just be here and take this in

taking these impressions. Are there some impressions that are sense experience, that actually are very important for you to take into experience. And actually, you should search them out. You know, so to be with some be with those in an environment with that's feels nurturing for your nourishing for you. So nutriment that you want to take in. I was invited on last Sunday to give a lead a guided meditation at windhover Center at Stanford University. They built a contemplative building. It's that Stanford that never been inside. But that was kind of pretty cool. If they built this to be for contemplate spiritual contemplation, and double lighting and the size of the space and the glass and you know that everything was kind of like, Oh, you go in there. It's like, This is nice. When I was a child in Europe, I sometimes like to go into cathedrals. And it was so nice to be there and feel it. In fact, there was one that was one of these formative impacts on me. I don't know if anybody if you've ever been to a place in France called Monson Michelle. It's a kind of a tourist spot and I guess, and you you drive across the plains of Normandy or Brittany, I forget where it is. And then driving along, suddenly this there's this thing, it's kind of like Disneyland castle. It kind of like on an island with a little mini Hill. And it's a there's this monastery, religious buildings kind of built on top of the mountain and it's kind of spirals up into the sky. It's quite impressive. And it's famous because when the tide is low, it's connected to the land but when the tide goes, comes in, and high then it's an island. So I went in there I went to one night to spend the night there and the island at PAX Christi youth hostel. I loved it little no place. There was a priest there who took me in we all sat a long wooden table with bread and probably wine you know, and it was a lovely kind of feeling of spirituality be there. And this piece took me and we went for a long walk in the evening and nice time with him. And then the next morning, I went to have a tour of the this big Cathedral monastery I guess. And we were walking around the whole place and some was pretty, pretty extravagant. But then we came in to where it was at the top of the hill of the island. And they're in the middle of the whole day complex was the original little chapel that had been built, still intact. Everything was built around it then every took it away. And I don't know there were probably eight of us in the tour group and We all felt fit in there, but it was relatively small. And I stepped into this chapel. And my whole being cut, cut, deeply peaceful. And the peace of the peacefulness was throughout my chest, like my chest and my rib cage. And my heart just felt like such profound sense of ease and peace. That is nice, cool, quiet. Stone Chapel from over 1000 years ago. And so when everyone left, I stayed behind, because this is something to take in to experience. So, you know, sometimes we can go to places that have an impact impact on us, that feels really good, that feels right, that this or this, whatever we want to be reminded of this, I want to be have this impression on me. Some of you are watching the Superbowl today. What impression will that have on you? When it when Superbowl is over? What will that do to your what kind of conditioning is that then, you know, maybe, you know, it's it could be fun and nice. And that sense of lightness and relaxation and delight and joy of watching that might be great for you, with friends or whatever.

Or you after it's over you say, you know, well, if I'd gone to the window, Center at Stanford, it spent those hours there instead. Boy, that could have been nice, or you know, going off, you know, going off, you know, to the look at the Ocean Beach, look at the beach and stormy weather would be beautiful. One of the conditioning factors has a big impact on my life. Again, being Norwegian, I spent a lot of time on the water a lot of time on the edges of the water. And for me, there's something when I look across water, especially water that's quiet, like if I go across the San Mateo bridge, and I'm fortunate enough not to be driving. And if the bay is completely still, and occasionally going up 101 to one just before purchase Candlestick Park used to be if it's completely still, something inside me just kind of settles down. You know, and again, it's kind of like my being in being with my grandmother or something. It's like, you know this because I've been conditioned, I've had this over and over again, the sense of safety and calm and peace that I've taken in by being in nature. So what impressions Do you give yourself? What impressions do you allow yourself to take in? And do you have the capacity Have you trained yourself to be have the kind of mindfulness and awareness that allows yourself to take in the impressions that are good to take in certain kind of openness and receptivity. The second food the

Buddha talked about a third way the Buddha talked about his intention. And this is uh, you know, interesting, the district, it's considered a food or nurture determined that what you want, as a conditioning factor, what you want, creates an impression, and especially repeated wanting of something over and over and over again. So you know, if you're constantly So, if you're lost in thought, planning the future, there's actually a desire in those plans is an intention, and might be interesting for you to go, you know, to look at what is it you're trying to do? What are you wanting, when you're thinking about the future? For some people, it's a some, some variation of being safe. The desire to be safe, that's a good desire to have, for sure. But to constantly over and over again, live in that desire for safety. Rather than feeling safety is not it's probably going to condition you not towards feeling safe. But it might actually convince you to feel less and less safe. Because you're kind of lost in your thoughts. And you know, you're actually not so safe when you're kind of lost there. If you spend your time complaining a lot, there's plenty of things in the world to complain about. There's no shortage. So you know, and so if you if you if you decide to stop for a few days, you know, you're not going to lose the reasons to complain. So do not, don't worry. But if you spend a lot of time complaining, it has a certain effect. It sets an impression on us. So complaining might be it might be out of anger, hostility, very, very mild, maybe hostility, and that's that has a very different effect. Then looking at someone or remembering someone, and rather than complaining about them, remembering their good qualities and sharing with someone This is like you know, Wow, did you see what they did? They kind of helped her neighbor when the neighbor was sick. We don't want to be pollyannish. and ignore you know what's difficult and difficult, challenging. But we don't have to give up, you know, we can give up complaining without being pollyannish. And there might be more realistic ways of looking at the world than that what we're seeing through by complaining, but complaining does have an intention in it something we want. And so what is that that has an effect on us. And the reason why I think it's so important to look at intentionality, what we want is that it might conditioned us more deeply than sense impressions. And so because it comes from our heart, it comes from deep inside of us. And Buddhism puts a tremendous emphasis on the importance of intention, the motivations, the sense of purpose, that desires by which we live our lives. And it to be very careful. Be very mindful of why you do what you do. Why do you say what you say? Why do you do what you do? Why do you think what you're thinking, to begin to getting a handle on that can see it clearly gives you the opportunity to be have more choice about the intentions that you want to live your life by? And the intentions that you live by, create an impression effect on you.

Then more deeply, that intentionality is consciousness, a little bit difficult to kind of say exactly what consciousness is. But in Buddhism, consciousness is a way of knowing. And there's many ways of knowing our experience in the world. But our knowing consciousness as a way of knowing is not neutral. Many times in the West, we think of consciousness as a neutral, innocent. You know, we can be just receptive receptivity, knowing awareness of the world. But I don't think there's a such a thing. That is, we know that we have to innocence perception of how things are, I read an article yesterday about

There's a famous experiment or little visual test, or they have two parallel lines, which are like next to each other. But then they have kind of, you know, if it's an arrow, then there's a kind of diagonal line on the top that goes back towards the base. And if you put another similar arrow in the other directions towards, so it's, so it's kind of like, like a diamond kind of, versus the other line, you do the diagonal lines, the other direction, going out like two hands of the head stretched out in the V, and the bottom, the same thing. And then you say, we just want the same length. And then you ask people, which is longer, which is shorter. And it turns out that Americans will always choose the one with the you know, sticking out like B as being the longer then than the other one. But if you go around the world, to different cultures, you get different answers. And there's some cultures where they always say, what's

the same length? And it turns out that Americans growing up in this culture are the outliers or the strange ones. And the researcher is talking about how weird we are, because we're the outliers are the outliers in terms of how we see. But with the assumption had been for years, that this is just part of optical illusion, that's part of humans, you know, human how the brain works. It turns out, it's not an optical illusion, it's a culturally conditioned phenomenon. And they are a researcher. So they claim is because a lot of people in the West, they live in square boxes, where there's a certain perceptual field that we see three dimensionally, that's very different than people who live like in the Amazon basin in the jungle, and the people in Amazon see if more accurately than America, they see the equal equal length. So the idea that how we see is a neutral thing is not a Buddhist idea, the ways that we see and so how we how we look at things, we look at it, you know, it's affected by intentionality or beliefs, we tend to notice certain things, you know, so how you know how we look. I noticed I remember when surprised I had when I was driving down El Camino many, many years ago. I think down through Mountain View or something. And we were shopping for a futon couch. And to my surprise, there were a lot Have couch stores and furniture stores and futon stores, I had no idea that and I, because I never noticed them. But now I was looking for them. So it was. So we're biased in how we know what we look for how we see, we look at we look at a room, and you know come into a room like this one here. Some people what they look what how they see how they know what's going on, is based on their conditioning in the past and their preferences and their feelings and everything. Some people notice that people, some people notice the chairs, some people notice where the escape routes are, you know, all kinds of things people notice. And so part of mindfulness practice is not only to be mindful, but to pay attention to how we're mindful. Are we mindful or restraining, we said work, are we receptive? Are we open? Do we tend there's that the mind tend to go to certain things over and over and over again, prioritize certain things, we have habits of how we know. And as we start to see these things and know these things, then we can have some ability to know in ways that are nourishing for us. They're supportive for us. There's a way of ways of being mindful, which are which are debilitating, and ways of being mindful, which are nurturing and supportive. So to be careful how we know is part of this. So we are one of the ways that we change, to have personal change. And spiritual change is a change that we support. Not that quick change that we create. But the change that we we make we we support to happen by the conditions that we allow ourselves to receive, that we put ourselves in. And we have some choice about the conditions that we Institute, we don't have universal choice. There's plenty of things which are not part of our control.

But if you can prepare the ground so that you condition yourself in a useful way to good way. Then when you go out into the world where it's maybe conflict and danger and you have to kind of act and do something, then perhaps you're conditioned to you kind of been you have your place to rest place that awkward feeling at home and yourself that you're less likely to be angry and less likely to be afraid, more likely to be confident, more likely to feel happy, courageous, more likely to be able to step into conflict. At the same time you feel at home, feel at ease. Oh, I hear I belong here. This is a place where I'm at rest and ease. It's okay. And not be swept into, you know, the kind of preoccupations that can make the whole thing more difficult. So, what impressions do you allow yourself to experience? What choices do you make? how careful you are? Are you are you with us? Some people are over careful. Some people are neurotically trying to set up everything so it's conditions are just perfect. And even if your could be kind of successful and so getting everything set up to be just perfect. It's probably not helpful. There the example of this is I've known people who are Buddhist monastics they've monasteries for years. Some of the some of them livings far in the forest, way from cities and society. And they got pretty happy, relaxed, concentrated, peaceful, and then I got it made. This is it I've arrived. And then they went into Bangkok. And oh, you know, and all their stuff comes up. And you know, so you know, it's important to not hide from the world not important not to avoid who we are and set up the conditions perfectly. So we're just comfortable. That doesn't work either. But it's but we can, within reason. Begin being careful and choice for making choices about what are the conditions that we allow

to condition us. And then as we get more and more conditioned in good ways. Then at some point that supports deep understanding and the deep understanding of insight meditation, the deep penetrating insight that is possible is built on the foundation of that Having very good, kind of creating very good psychophysical conditions for stability, confidence, confidence, safety ease, so that the inner eye or inner perception can see an effective way. So I hope this was useful give you at least give you something to think about. And it's something that if you find it kind of provocative this idea in one way or the other, it might be something that you spend some time talking to other people about. And so it kind of lives in you and you think about it and reflect on it and with others and hear what they have to say. And that might give you something to do during halftime. Right. So thank you all very much.