

2019-11-24 Ethics For A Modern World

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SPEAKERS

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The three trainings are there, three categories that are supposed to encompass all of Buddhist practice, three areas of practice in Buddhism. And the first one is the sila, ethics. The second is called Samadhi, which is usually translated as meditation in this context or cultivating the mind. And then the third one is pañña, which is usually translated as wisdom. And there are certainly other ways of translating these words. Dalai Lama has a book on these three trainings. And his title for the book is kindness, clarity and wisdom. So what we might translated as ethics he calls kindness, what he what what is meditation, he calls clarity, and, and then wisdom is wisdom. So think that part of what motivates me to give this talk, it was an attempt to explore what I think is an important topic for our times. I believe that our society in our world is changing so much these days, that it would be useful to reassess or re rethink what Buddhist ethics is and how it works. And, and probably, as I study these things, that some of the more modern interpretations of Buddhist ethics probably are ready for a new interpretation, new understanding of how this works in our lives, because of how much our society is changing. So I'll get to that in a little bit. So have three trainings. What's interesting about these three trainings are they not only encompass all the Buddhist train all the Buddhist practices, but they also make to encompass three major areas, maybe all areas of human life and integrated individual, the first one sila has to do with our behavior. The second Samadhi has to do with the state or quality of our inner life for mind. And wisdom has to do with the quality of how we see and understand the world. So the first is behavior. The second is the quality or state of how we are on the inside. And then the third is, then how we view how we see the world we live, how we understand it, and that's kind of covers most things. Now, it's a little bit unusual, perhaps in the way that we often talk about sila. To hear that's about behavior. It's very common to translate sila as virtue and virtue ethics as a Very popular and in kind of in Western philosophy and virtue has to do with kind of inner qualities. How you are you have virtuous qualities, you have a generosity of kindness you have, you know, compassion, different things. And so the measure of it all this, again how you are on the inside, and that motivates or inspires certain behavior, but what's important is to measure the quality of your virtue related to this idea of virtue is the idea that Buddhist ethics is centered on intentionality, that somehow that is the intentions we have that define whether the, whether something is ethical or not ethical. And that I want to question if that's adequate in the world that we're living in now. And that this has to be looked at more carefully. So these three areas and so sila literally means behavior. So in more recent times, a bigger body of the great translator of the ancient texts, Buddhist texts, has been translating the word sila as virtuous behavior. And so you know, it didn't used to be used to for a while they translated as virtue. And then as he thought about it more, I guess, it's really about behavior. So now he does virtuous behavior. And that's probably fine. The emphasis is on the behavior, how we act and how we speak.

So I want to read to you an ancient commentary about sila, and it's translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi before he, he changed it to virtuous behavior, he's still using Word virtue here. virtue, it should be reflected

upon as the basis for rapture and joy, as granting immunity from fear of self reproach. the reproach of others and punishment. Virtue should be reflected on as praised by the wise as the root cause for freedom from remorse and the basis of safety. That's pretty good. So now it's if you we read it again, with bigger bodies, newer translation is virtuous behavior, I think you get a little different flavor of it. virtuous behavior should be reflected upon as the basis for rapture enjoy, as granting immunity from fear of self reproach poaching of others, and punishment should be reflected upon as the as praised by the wise as the root cause for freedom from remorse as a basis for safety. So now it's the behavior there's all these things and So, you know, it's a little bit disconcerting for some people to hear the emphasis is on behavior. It's particularly disconcerting maybe for someone who grew up in the 60s that that's the emphasis because there was kind of rebellion against all kinds of behavior that was insisted upon kind of normative behavior that was seemed to many of us back then. very hypocritical. They didn't have any any roots in sores in sincerity, how we really were and were kind of forced to kind of fit into certain modes of behavior that didn't seem right. And so there was kind of a rebellion against behaviors as being the definition of what was of ethics and, and more kind of what could feel into the radical in their kind of extreme moments had to do with whether it feels right. And whether it feels right that has some wisdom to it, if your ability to feel is really deep but if It's not very deep, you know, just feels good even, you know, then, you know, party time. So this idea of behavior. In this emphasis on early ethics, there's a particular form of behavior. That's called guarding the sense doors. And sometimes people will call it restraining the sense doors. And the idea of restraint for someone grew up in the 60s is particularly uninvited and you know, and welcome and because you know, you want to just if it feels good, do it. And so, but the literal word is to protect, protect protection at the sense doors, and the idea of this protection is not restrained, not turning your eyes down, not looking at anything so you get caught by the sense world out there. Bolton. boards and attractive people are attractive iPhones or whatever it might be, that you actually want in the world, participating world seeing, sensing experiencing the world, but you're watching at the place where you see and hear and taste and all that, to make sure that there's no grasping, we don't cling or tighten around anything. That's what the protection is, is also a no pronoun, as far as I can tell in the protection idea. What are we protecting? One of the things we're protecting, and this becomes true for people who begin meditating is we're protecting something that's precious inside. We're protecting a quality of, of beauty, have a capacity for the heart to thrive. There's a word in Pali that I think is best Translated by the English word, thrive. The cooler and it's to grow, to increase to develop just the same kind of meanings that to go with the word thrive. But thrive really has a kind of enlivening, invigorating kind of feeling. What what helps the heart, the inla inner life, to thrive, to be beautiful, to be something that's a refuge for ourselves. As we meditate, we begin discovering that we calm down, we stop being so harsh in ourselves, we stop being so preoccupied stressed out, and we start discovering there's something really good that lives inside of us. And that is obscured by grasping and clinging. And so when we grasp to the sense doors to what goes on, then we obscure this beauty, which lets us thrive. But also because there's no pronoun connected to it, it's also a way of protecting others.

And, you know, it's generally a good idea to live a life that protects others as well. That's the Buddha actually said this wonderful instructions. He said, Make yourself safe for others. Isn't that then I'm inspired by that idea. Make yourself safe from others. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as make yourself a refuge for others. But the literal meaning is safe. Make yourself safe for others go through the world. And not not only don't call it harm, but a higher kind of call, which is safe for other people as you go through this world. But to be safe, to be someone who's safe, who doesn't cause harm, to be something to be someone who has discovered something inside that it's worth protecting something beautiful and valuable. The second, training the training and Samadhi training and developing our inner life is really crucial and the truth Hand in hand, that how we are in the inside effects how we behave in the world outside of us. It's not I think it's generally recognized that when people are Oh, there's an expression

now hangry Have you ever been hangry? It's a kind of an acronym right for what is it hungry and hungry and angry, right? So yeah, hungry and angry. But if you're hungry and angry and tired and thirsty, and frustrated, the chance of doing something unethical, saying something that's mean or harmful to others, goes up dramatically, even for the person who normally is maybe the most ethical person you can, you know, and so, to safeguard ourselves, so we don't allow ourselves to get to the place where we're hangry we don't get to the place where we have the stressed out the inner life. Where we're, we're just triggered to behave in ways that are not, you know, not good. For some people that just means don't be mean and how you speak for some people in our society means don't shoot someone. And because there are people who have guns and junk for dad comes to speak here, he works with lifers in the prison who are there because they killed someone. And he asks them that he has been to hundreds and hundreds of them he's worked with now and, and helped with their inner transformation. And he trains them and folks who say how he does his wonderful thing he says, he has groups of about 30 men who work together at any given time, who are lifers. And he has them announced how many years they've been in prison. And then he adds it all up for the 30 men. And usually they get to somewhere in the average of 700 years, that collectively they've been in prison. And then he says, What is the? How long was the period of imminent danger? meaning how long was the period in which you were in danger of committing your crime? And most of them the crime what they did killing someone was rather impulsive was a thing of the moment. And some, you know, sometimes they were in terms of, of seconds. So they add that up those 30 men, how many? How long was the period of imminent danger? And I forget exactly, you know what numbers but it's it's in the range of about seven minutes for 30 murderers. Isn't that something? Seven Minutes versus 700 years. That's quite a trade off.

So one of the things he teaches his men in the prison is to pay attention to the moment of imminent danger and learn to recognize them and learn how to see it coming, learn how to take care of oneself, so that they don't kind of fall go, you know, go overboard with it and do something they don't. So the same thing happens to people who are, you know, just simply mean in what they say to their spouse, or someone is the chances are that there was a moment of imminent danger, and to recognize when we're frustrated, impatient, hungry, hangry, whatever it might be, and then be able to recognize that and be careful, is good. But what's even better, and more important, I think, is not just simply to recognize when we're in danger, but to actually cultivate the opposite. to cultivate an inner quality of being that is not you're simply not going to be triggered, you know, in harmful ways, but it's actually going to be inspired to do completely the opposite. Inspire to do the things which are are generous to do the things which are kind to do the things that are, you know, supportive for other people and nice to other people. I don't know if this is the best example to give, but it's on my mind because it just happened. I was in Berkeley last week, early in the morning, and this man came up to me with a hospital band on his, on his on his hair on his wrist. And he said, he held out his hand with a bunch of coins in it. And he said, you know, can you give me some money? I'm just came out of hospital and I'm hungry and I know where to go. And so I didn't know you know, sometimes. That's a nice story. So who knows? And you know, I had almost no teeth and seemed a bit ragged. So I was actually on the phone on the sidewalk when he came up and he said, Just wait a minute. I think you gotta say Just wait a minute. I wanted to finish my phone call. So he kind of, you know, it was his corner. So he was there and he wasn't. He wasn't going anywhere. And, and so I finished my phone call and then I gave him \$5. And so that was nice. You know, I kind of thought, you know, I looked at my wallet, that's what I had there was nice to give him and I felt good about it just, you know, simple thing to do. But how he responded to me, made my day. I was so happy. I mean, if he like just lit up, like so happy, so relieved. So like, wow, that was a great thing. Firstly, fist bump me. And then he wanted to give me a hug. Which I twice, which I kind of went along with, but he also told me that he was in the hospital for pneumonia. So I wasn't so enthusiastic. And, and then he happily went off for leftist corner. So anyway, so this idea that I'm telling

you the story is, is how I benefited from that. That somehow it was like food for me to see his joy, his delight, his warmth, his generosity to me in being grateful. What a great thing that I've benefited from that probably more than then he benefited maybe who knows. So what you know what inner quality, what a way of being, what kind of inner clarity to use Dalai Lama's language develops your capacity to want to respond to the world and that kind of way, rather than shutting down and feeling unsafe and all that. And this is the function of meditation practice. One of the functions to develop this inner life to have something precious, valuable, beautiful. That's worth protecting worth living from that inspires you that really wow this is good. Rather than looking inside and finding someone who's taskmaster or harsh or hostile even to oneself that in and how we speak to ourselves, look inside and find someone who's you know, kind to oneself supportive of oneself supportive of the world, you know, find feelings of joy and delight and peacefulness and beautiful qualities. So these two go hand in hand. So, behavior, so how this works in our modern world, What's there? So one of the things I was thinking about is the way in which there's so much news that's so called news that spread.

That is not accurate. That's fake. They say whether it's spread Some of the news outlets, or spread in social media is having a huge impact on our society. And, and even some of the newspapers are like reading. Because, you know, they have a political slant that I kind of like, you know, when I read some of these articles I questioned Wow. And there's really where did they get this idea from? And just a few times I've even gone and done some research to learn more about a particular topic and wait a minute. I'm not sure about this. You know, maybe they're kind of just spinning as well. And, and so how much can we trust? The media? How much can we trust? What we read is a huge topic in our society. When I was in fifth grade, or sixth grade, I had this wonderful teacher who I think it was like Reader's Digest. Something like Reader's Digest would have these articles. About the world and politics and there was an article about Russia, back then Soviet Union. And he wanted to teach us how to read the news and reports, to be able to see how it wasn't always accurate. You know, this was 1965 or 66. So this is kind of concocting on going on for a while. It's just much more intensified in modern world. So if we can't be, because we have how important it is to be careful with what we read. One of the ways to be careful, is to be very careful, heightened care, in how we behave as a result of it. And so, what we say and what we do, and so Buddhist ethics sila has to do with our behavior, it becomes increasingly important to speak in ways that are truthful, that are helpful, beneficial, that are kind and there are that are timely. If what you have to say is not true, or your doubt whether it's true if what you say is really doesn't benefit the world. If it's not kind of it's not the right time to say it. The Buddha's instructions are, don't say it. Wait until it's true. Wait until it's beneficial time to say it. Wait until it's you can say in a kind way, and wait until the right time to say it. So if we can be have to be careful if we can't be sure of what we're reading, hopefully it can we can be sure about what we how we speak. This is so important because we have the tremendous amount of mean spirited communication going on in our society. I'm just astounded by the degree of it. You know, certainly on social media, certainly on comments on the news, certainly in, you know, all kinds of ways. And I think people feel like they have permission to speak this way, not only permission, but it has certain cachet. It has a certain kind of sense of empowerment and, and, and feeling your right and belonging and creating sense of self and other, which is enlivening for people. enlivening is not inner thriving. And so if you don't have a sense of what inner thriving is, and you're relying on being enlivened, then it's a shallow world, and then what you do so and then there's behavior of what we do with our bodies. And so the five precepts become increasingly important. There was one teacher who said that not having the five precepts as part of your life is like buying a really nice new car. That you're going to just love to drive around in. But you didn't, you didn't even want to save some money for it. So you so one of the options you didn't choose to get were the brakes.

So, too, you know, you've been given this wonderful vehicle for this life, your body, your being. And sometimes we forget that we have brakes, we didn't work, we just left the brakes at the factory or

somewhere. And the precepts are really breaks. Like if you're getting close to wanting to kill someone, put on the brakes. If you're getting close to actively harming someone, put on the brakes. Don't do it. If you get on if you're, you know, close to wanting to take what is not given to steal, put on the brakes. If you're going to harm someone, anyone Not even your partner but other people through your sexuality, put on your brakes. If you're going to lie, and you see it coming, put on the brakes, if you want to, you know, and then in Buddhism, they say if you're going to start getting intoxicated with anything, drugs or alcohol, put on the brakes don't do it. And, and this is a way of making yourself safe and making the world around you safe. Some of us, you know, some of you perhaps, who feel like you can engage in alcohol and drugs safely, which maybe you can. You might think twice about if you're contributing to a world where other people are safe from the influence of these things. We're in it together. And what we do have some influence around where we go in that thing else, I'm very concerned about how I spend my money. I think of money as having an ethical spin on it. And, you know, I live on donations that dāna that people give up. I feel like the money that I have to spend for my life in my family has this wonderful profound spin of generosity as part of it. And so I don't want to go out and buy cigarettes with it, you know, why would you think about that? You know, get a lot of Dine Out buy cigars. You know, I want to not only do I want to be careful with it, but I also want to contribute to our society by continuing this ethical spin a good spin on it. And so I'll try to buy things or use the money in ways that kind of go along and that kind of continue that kind of way. And so, but you know, even though you can buy a drink alcohol happily and easily and safely Is that you know, what spin Are you is your are you putting on those dollars as they go Are those electrons now as they go out into the world. And so this I think it's an interesting thing to consider. So, one reflection I have is that with the more fake news there is, the more we have to really be impeccable and careful with our behavior. One of the ways I see it operating is with all the self righteousness that's going on around identity politics and about politics in general and divisiveness that comes along. I think that when we are angry towards others, when we shame others, when we kind of box them in that we're actually harming ourselves as well. That that anything that limits our inner thrive and closes it down, you know, is because creating division before between people is harming ourselves. So it'd be real careful with what we do and how we do it. Find ways to engage and changing the world, changing others that doesn't feel put people doesn't shame people or criticize people or make people feel less. There's an AI solver in UC Berkeley, there's a new little project on that's called zero shame. 100% empowerment. So, you know, so let's empower people and encourage people to change rather than rather than close him down. So then, can I think I was thinking about the longest line is what was it? It's gone from my mind now? Oh, yes. is this idea of intentionality? It's all about our intention. You know, I, I didn't mean to call I'm not causing any harm, I have no intention, my intentions are good. You know, you know, I'm not doing anything is

so it's okay. You know, think about it.

Many of us are causing my probably I just I assume all of us in some ways here are causing harm unintentionally that if you were the only person in California who ever drove a car, even if it was a really smoky polluting car, it really would have negligible negligible effect on the air quality. And the people who live near freeways would not get as my All kinds of cancers and difficult things. Because just one car, right? But when you have 36 million or something like I don't know many people 24 million cars, you know, in California, many of them concentrated in urban areas. You're unintentional. I'm so innocent. I'm not doing anything is contributing to the aggregate of at all. Yes, I have no intention. As we look at climate change and environmental destruction that's going on in our planet, it's billions of people who have no intention to cause any harm to cause any damage. What billions of people who are off the hook, because of their intent, because of their intention is and the harm just gets perpetuated, right? So in many, many ways, intentionality is not good enough. In fact, if it's been it's kind of a myth that's been perpetuated that that that the Buddha said that what's important about our ethical behavior has to do

with the intentions behind it. It doesn't seem like he said that at all. For the Buddha, he analyzed our behavior, the ethics of it, based on the consequences the behavior has, if it causes harm, or causes benefit, and that requires some study that requires being awake and paying attention of what you say and what you do. And even when, what you what you think, what kind of effect that has on the world around you. To be hyper individualistic, it's all about me and now I can just take care of myself and just watch my own intentions without any attention. To the impact our life has, is not not the Buddha's way of analyzing our life. It has to do with how, you know, the, the effect in the world. And one of the ways that this is stated, I love in that by the Buddha. And it's a statement that can be seen as a summary or encapsulation of all of Buddhism. So it's a very powerful statement. So it goes like this. A wise person does not. He's not motivated to cause harm to oneself to others, to self and others or to the whole world. A wise person of great wisdom is concerned with the welfare for oneself, the welfare for others, the welfare for both self and others, and the welfare of the whole world that those are consequentialist ways of thinking. We're interested in what the consequences are going to be for ourselves and the world around us. That's the analysis that the Buddha has. And so I think that as the world with the environmental challenges we have and economic challenges, we have to have that on the forefront of our concern. All these areas, self and other is very different than some of the challenging views we have these days in the United States that are all about me. You know, I have a right I deserve no one should tell me what to do. I can live you know, I can live independently. And, and you know, so it's and my intentions are good. But are they really are they really are they are the consequences, really good. That's another way. And the third way to the nice I think needs to be reconsidered or third to kind of aspect of Buddhist practice that I think is really important for our modern modern world is that we're learning more and more, and I'm certainly learning in the last probably five years or more about what's called implicit bias. And it's kind of amazing what we're learning about how

assumptions, beliefs, attitudes that we have about other people are invisible to oneself, so maybe subconscious. And that and that involves bias prejudice. One example is ageism. And that there's now all these studies of implicit bias that you know that there's a huge bias for young people in all kinds of ways. in favor of young people and against older people. But what do I want to mention this, what's particularly interesting is that older people have just as much of the same bias as younger people. Isn't that amazing? So, sometimes, you know, it's, you know, it's just so internalized. So part of the culture that we carry with is the bias. So that is true for all kinds of isms. One of the things I've noticed in the last five years that it used to be the suffix ism, refer to beliefs. Now it seems to refer to an implicit unconscious bias that we carry with us attitudes we have, and so we have, you know, to ageism, we have racism, we have ableism. We have no say sexism speciesism all kinds of things right? And there you can, you can go online now I forget and take implicit bias test. And I took it a few years ago. And it's all kinds of different categories you can choose place I went to choose different categories of ism that you want to check yourself out on. And, and what was surprising to me was that my before I did the exam myself My, my self evaluation around this was that was that I was I had less implicit bias than the test showed. I did all these different categories. And I wasn't minor side, the small side, but it was still more than I thought I had. And so Wow, this is interesting that my self evaluation Wasn't was seemingly not accurate. So that's kind of kind of the nature of implicit bias. And so it's, you know, if you have a chance, I would encourage you to do some of this is kind of a bit of a wake up call to do these tests. And what's the one that someone know the name of the one that's coming out of Harvard University? What? Oh, so, if you if you go implicit bias test, you can find it and, you know, I encourage you to do it. So how this relates to Buddhism, though, is that this the Samadhi part, the part of mental training, training the heart creates the conditions internally, where the mind where our attention, mindfulness is able to watch much more carefully. The thoughts the attitudes, the reactivity. We have to the people we encounter, and through what goes on in the world. And also the quieter and Still the mind gets. It's not just purpose of being still in quiet, this still there and quiet, that mind gets them more earlier and more

subtle. We can see the arising of reactivity of judgments of beliefs that are happening. I don't know if it's going to catch all of our implicit bias. But we'll catch it more and more, we'll see the beginnings of it. Oh, there it is. If the mind is crowded with thoughts and ideas and desires and wishes and stressed out and involved and all kinds of wonderful projects, and all kinds of wonderful judgments of everyone else. There's too much, you know, too much going on in the mind to really watch the birth of all these little teeny little subtle decisions that are made all the time. So to be To catch this implicit bias earlier as part of that is what you really learned to meditate and settle yourself and sell yourself and learn to be mindful and carry that into your daily life, you'll start catching this much better. And this is really crucial for our society as a whole. I think as things go along here, because

another thing that I've been learning over the hobby over the last 10 years in a way that I never dreamt of before and I actually now can see it operating in amazing ways is how small little seemingly inconsequential, implicit bias, or bias can be implicit preference for one kind of person. If a lot of people are doing it, it adds up, just like the driving thing, right? It adds up. And so now I see it now. I'm seeing so so many ways in which white people in our culture get a little preferential treatment, sometimes huge then. But what I'm mostly knows is little preferential, here's a little bit, here's a little, here's a little bit and it adds up and adds up. And then if it happens 10,000 times a day, each time, unnoticed each time, just part of the fabric of texture of society. Part just kind of normal just delays how the world is, is not seen. But you know, it adds up to a huge advantage that white people have in so many years in our life. Everyone's innocent, I didn't do it. And, and this, you know, implicit bias thing in favor of white people. Remember that the old people had implicit bias against old people. Or preferential for certain people. So people sometimes who are not white, also have that for white people, sometimes a little kind of give them a little bit of benefit of the doubt or a little bit extra push here and there. And it adds up to a lot. So as a society as a whole, and how these stressors stressors are developing in our society and being seen much more clearly now. I think it's really useful, really important that we can, that in terms of living an ethical life, that we train ourselves so we do something like meditation practice, that we do some kind of inner mental development that allows us to really subtle and quiet the mind, strengthen the mind, or to use Dalai Lama sit language, create clarity in the mind, so that we can really start seeing more and more the teeniest little reactivities we have cringing or opening or going for or against. So we can take responsibility for it and be much more careful. And in all kinds of ways in our society. So in this way, I hope that today's talk, I've kind of tried to re present the idea of Buddha's ethics in a way that maybe is more relevant for how much our society is changing. And I wanted to highlight that it has changed a lot. Maybe all of you know that I know. But to take the change into account, and really be willing to change accordingly. To get yourself in harmony with what's happening or in wise about that relationship to what's happening is really, you know, appropriate for someone who wants to live in life grounded in wanting to live for the welfare of oneself, the wealth Fear of others the welfare of both self and others, and the welfare for all beings the whole world. So