

Training in Freedom

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Good day, everyone. It's nice to be here in this way, sharing the Dharma, sharing the practice. And sharing may be our care for each other. So today I want you to begin by making a distinction in Buddhism between what can be called practice and what can be called training. The word for practice, *bhāvanā*, can also mean cultivation, development of something. And we practise mindfulness to develop mindfulness.

We practise concentration to develop concentration. We practise love to develop love. And there's a lot of emphasis in traditional Buddhism to practice as a way of developing ourselves, developing capacities that are wonderful. And at some point, there's also training. The distinction that I'm making here is that the word training I'm using to mean that we have an activity that we're doing, and we're training in that activity. Or to say, it may be we have a sense we know something about what this life is about, and then we train in that life.

But we have to know what that life is about. We have to know what the activity is that's really valuable that we're focusing on here in practice. And so the practice. Many people have a logical idea, or have some sense or intuition, that the Dharma practice is a good thing, and they'll engage in it, and all practise it and do it, and then at some point there is something happens where there's a clear enough experience of a different way of being, a way of being that may be characterized. Buddhism likes to characterize it by the language of freedom, characterized by a sense of liberation or freedom. Sometimes it characterizes by a feeling of profound peace, sometimes by a profound feeling of happiness and well being, and sometimes as a clear experience of selflessness or lack of selfishness.

And this then becomes a reference point for how practice and train, how training then goes. And they say traditionally in Buddhism, and you don't take it too seriously for yourself, but that it's when a person has an experience or a feeling, personal feeling or experience of freedom that now they know for themselves what the training is about. And until then, practice

is partly an act of faith, partly a good idea. Perhaps it's just a nice way of calming down or stress reduction. Nothing wrong with that, but at some point it becomes something much more significant. And the difference between these two, quite a big difference.

In fact, when people come to practice, it's rare that someone, sometimes people, have an experience of freedom, experience of very profound peace that they've had in life. Some place may be accidentally that they do have that reference point before they come in practice. But generally, if we don't have that, then it's hard to know what it is this experience of freedom is like and why it's hard to have it. To know what it's like is that we tend to focus on our lives in a somewhat self-centred way. What's in it for me, myself and my? I mean, myself and myself, me, mine and myself.

We're trying to we have an orientation. It's about my experience, my being safe, my being better, my being successful, my being healed, my being free. And the freedom that Buddhism is pointing towards doesn't really fit into any model of being self-centred, of self-centredness. It's a little bit like a caterpillar probably doesn't know it's going to become a butterfly when it forms a cocoon to be in. I can't imagine what it's going to be like, maybe. But then when it comes free of the cocoon, it has wings and flies.

It has its freedom. It could never have imagined when it was still a caterpillar. And so, in the same way, it's hard to imagine when we're still a caterpillar. We're still kind of living in what we're taught and oriented to growing up for any of us a certain kind of self-centredness in extreme forms, a selfish life. But even people who are not selfish, but who seem kind of actually very generous and kind and supportive of others, they can still be, in some ways, maybe healthy self-centredness and orientation from the point of view of how we define ourselves, how we see ourselves as a self. It's a kind of the way that we engage and assert ourselves in the world, and in extreme forms.

The self-assertion is a self-aversion, and wanting something, getting something. And this is maybe an uninteresting distinction between the kind of freedom that Buddhism focuses on, and the kind of freedom that's often popular in the United States, I think, day after independence day and a day, or, you know, a time when many people in America are insisting that they should be free to do whatever they want, and not wear a mask, and not have anyone tell them what to do. There's an emphasis, a certain kind of freedom, which at times has been important for this country and at times is a problem. And it's the freedom to do things, the freedom of unfettered activity, without any limitations on what we do, to freedom to vote, freedom to assembly, freedom to bear arms, freedom to shop. And, you know, in a kind of kind of the representative of an unfettered freedom. To be a consumer is to have an unlimited

credit card.

Just be able to just have a freedom, just to have all our desires met. The freedom that Buddhism talks about is a freedom from, the freedom from attachment and clinging, the freedom from hate, the freedom from craving, from delusion, freedom from fear. That's a freedom from all the ways that we're limited, the way we are, restrict ourselves in some way. So if you have an open hand, it feels you know the hand has been finely opened and relaxed, and the hand is open, and feels good to have the hand open, but feels so good that we want to grasp it. As soon as you grasp the open hand, the open hand is lost. And so if selfishness is like that, there can be an ease in life as soon as we want it or appropriate it for ourselves that there is a contraction that goes on, and we actually lose a certain kind of freedom in the assertion of self, the aggressive assertion of me, in what I want, or tightening up.

And it's kind of like, if a person is fairly relaxed, they might, like I said earlier, the diaphragm might be moving freely and nicely, and that's very good. But then if we get, we know that the easeful breath, the breathing, is very adaptable, very changeable, affected by our mood and activity that if we get afraid, the breathing changes. You can feel the contraction and tightness in the uplifting of the breathing, and tends to be a lot of chest breathing. Perhaps sometimes when we're afraid, anger affects our breathing. Selfishness wanting and aggressive selfishness affects our breathing, and so the breathing no longer feels relaxed and easeful. There's a contraction and tightness, a different breathing pattern with excessive selfishness.

If the people or if someone is very attentive to the effect, they'll feel how the selfishness has contracted something. It might be the chest, the breathing. It might be the shoulders. It might be the jaws. Or it might be the eyes that are looking in a way and zeroing in or tight or very focused. Or it might be in the brain, the contraction around me, myself, and mine.

I have to have my way, or my way, or the way, or kind of a tightening down or insistence that all feels it's a contraction. It's a limitation. Someone who is very selfish might have been able to assert themselves in the world and have a lot of freedom in action, but they do so at the expense of losing the freedom of their hearts and minds. But if we're not attentive to that inner life, we won't feel the impact it has. We won't feel how limiting it is and how dramatic a loss of freedom it is. We won't feel that we like the open hand, we won't notice that the hand has become clenched, and therefore there is no more open hand.

And so as we practice, and we begin discovering a more freedom, one of the things magic, kind of magical, very special things that begins happening is there starts to be an orientation or understanding about in a life which is not self-centered. I like to think of it as being

situation-centered, where we're open and very present, very attentive to everything that's here. It's no denial of what's here within us, around us, but is no contraction, no tightening around it. So as mindfulness works, it works on us and affects us, and we start feeling that, getting the feedback system of noticing the impact on how we behave, what we do, what we feel, what we want, what we don't want, the impact of our inner dialogue and how it undermines us or limits us, the ways in which desires work or hostilities work within us. And we start feeling more and more the case, the personal cost for that then at some point maybe we start relaxing more deeply, settling more deeply, and we start cunning, going into the cocoon, having been a caterpillar of self for so long, and we don't know. We can't really know how we're going to come out.

And fact, you know what the practice is about, that I'm supposed to get something even, idea that supposed to be peaceful. It can be too much a kind of idea that it kind of goes along with the old idea of self, and it's up to me and measuring yourself: How far have I gotten? And have I gotten as far as the person next to me and other Buddhists that I know? And all this self game goes on at some point, there's a deeper letting go. At some point, there's some kind of falling away, a shedding, that kind of more or less traditional idea of this where there is a profound experience of letting go. Well, profound. I don't want to make this a strong language today.

There's a deep, or there's enough experience of letting go that there's a different reference point. Rather than a reference point of self and self-assertion or self-denial or self-protection, there is a reference point of freedom that's available. There's a rest reference point of some kind of peace that is maybe not so personal. Some time ago, there used to be a lot of discussion about transpersonal psychology. So this transpersonal peace or non-personal peace. It's certainly here, but it's not so easy to associate it with this self.

So the open hand, it's hard to find it if the hand is contracted, and to kind of figure out what the open hand like. When the hand is always contracted, you know, we don't have any sense of what it is. But when the hand is finally open. Now I know what it's about. Now I know I can keep my hand relaxed. And might still be a habit of contracting might be there, but now the person knows a potential, a possibility. Maybe they didn't know before if they spend their whole life contracted.

And then the training, the training becomes a training to stay with an open hand, or the training is to realize that. Yes, to use it again, the analogy, the diaphragm is relaxed as I breathe, and I know it's possible to be relaxed in my breathing the way I never knew before. And now let me see if I can let that ease and relaxation spread up into the chest where it's still tight. The training is to expand that relaxation. And it's possible to do that in a self-centred way.

Let me be the most relaxed breathing person on the block.

Or it's possible just feel that there's a momentum inside at a direction, the direction inside that wants to go towards greater freedom. And it's not necessarily a personal thing. It's more like this wants to work on us. This is where the direction that life wants to take. Life doesn't want to be contracted. It doesn't want to be limited, doesn't want to be it. Life wants to be free.

But the freedom of life is not necessarily the freedom to do from the vantage point of self, me, myself, and mine. It's the freedom to live from this inner freedom to live from a place of no craving, no attachments, and even a place where there's kind of no self there, no self-centredness at least. And to know what that is like without having experienced it is kind of like the caterpillar trying to figure out what it's like to be a butterfly. Maybe I can't figure it out at all. So at some point in this practice of that we do, at some point there is enough of an experience of this absence of self-centredness, this peacefulness, this the mind being at ease, and that we know all this is possible. I had no idea that this kind of inner freedom was possible.

And now that I know, this is what the practice is about. Now, I can train now. I know what the training is. The training is to live with this peace, this freedom. The training that's the activity of freedom. The activity of training is the activity of living from a free place without these all these inner limitations, inner constrictions that we have.

And then how do we start expanding this place. How do we expand the peacefulness, the ease, the freedom to all the different parts of who we are? It's one thing to have a glimmer or have that door opened up a little bit, but then what the practice then becomes, the training becomes, is to find out how to expand it more wider and wider and wider. It's kind of like we have to hold in freedom. And with that first to hold, then we begin to expand it outwards into all the areas of our life. So it's not dramatic. It doesn't have to be a dramatic experience of enlightenment or something that this to hold.

There are ordinary experiences in life that can give us a feeling of freedom, the feeling of peace. That is what we're training for. So a couple of days ago my wife and I went for a hike in the mountains, and we spent a few hours next to a beautiful, clear little mountain creek with boulders around it and little fish in it. And I could just spend it, you know, I could have felt like I could have spent the whole day just looking at the pattern of the water flowing over on the surface, flowing down this creek. And there was something very captivating, relaxing, easeful. And the clear water, the clear sky, the clear kind of beautiful mountain stream that we were in a peaceful place, that just looking at the stream, my eyes were not tight or zeroed

in.

My mind was not tight and concerned beneath anything. My mind was kind of like floating, like the river, kind of floating on the river. Very peaceful, very at ease. Nothing particular, no particular subject of thought that preoccupied me, no preoccupation. Certainly there were thoughts, but everything was very still and quiet and peaceful. Maybe some people have it looking at the ocean if they live near the ocean, or laying on your back and looking at the clouds above, or and it can give a feeling for a kind of peaceful, easeful place that is very meaningful.

It can provide a deep, satisfying feeling of contentment and ease that is a reference point for noticing how we lose it to noticing how we get caught up by things, or preoccupied, or the mind starts spinning and doing all the stuff, and then remembering that, Oh, that's a possibility. That's what that is the place to live from. So in Buddhism, when people start doing the training, they have this reference point: This is worthwhile. This is a valuable place to come. And in fact, sometimes this reference point is so strong that a person realizes that to live any other way is not worthwhile. Any degree of stress, any degree of pushing or aggressive selfing, any aggression, any hostility, any craving, any lusting for anything, it is not worth it.

There's such a huge loss. Any selfishness is not worth it. There's a what's most precious and most valuable is lost in that freedom, this profound sense of peace or happiness that can come. It can't be selfish, because as soon as we're selfish, we've kind of closed up to close the hand into a fist, and to feel that interface between the peace and the tendencies to be selfish. Again, is one of the great kind of challenges of practice, one of the great dances of practice, because we can't just give up our self-centredness that easily. But to feel a happening on all the emotions that come, all the layers of the mind come and say, Well, I'm supposed to be angry or hostile. I'm supposed to want something. What's wrong that? What's wrong with having, you know, more things, or this and that? I deserve it. And all this stuff that goes on in that meeting place between freedom and where we're not so free, where we're not so free, insists on having a freedom to do, not realizing that it's doing that.

We lose the freedom from craving, from selfishness, and so there starts to be this dance, this meeting place. When we start training in Buddhism, we can expect we're not going to be perfect. We're going to have all kinds of material to look at and be honest about, and to work our way through all kinds of attachments and clingings and selfishness that operates. And we have this reference point. Now, and there starts to be a dialogue, a meeting place, and influence from one to the other. And the training is to have the influence go from freedom into

that place where we're not yet completely free, to let the freedom, the peace, the happiness, the love begin to move into those parts of our lives.

We are still not there to have this kind of selflessness, not self-centredness, I like not self-centredness, spread into the rest of our life. And in the process of doing so, to learn that this non self-centred place that's the genesis, that can be the origin of how we live in the world. What motivates us, what helps us take care of the world, what helps us take care of this being that's here ourselves. There's a whole different foundation for choosing how to live our life that's different from the foundation of selfishness, the foundation, It's about me, myself, and mind. It's all about me. It can still be about this being here. You still be about this body, this heart, this mind, but we're no longer self-centred now.

We can be situation-centered. We're here, we're at the centre of our personal situation, and we're aware of everything here, including what's here in ourselves. And we know how to take care of what's in here. We know what's in here is as important as any other being out there, any person out there. But we start discovering that to really take care of this being well, we train it. We engage in the training of freedom, the training of non-attachment, the training of non-craving, non-hostility, non-lust, non-craving.

So we have a practice that we do, and we have a training. The practice is to cultivate these qualities of mind that support us: to cultivate concentration, cultivate mindfulness, cultivate patience, cultivate honesty, cultivate generosity, cultivate kindness and compassion. There's all these qualities that we can cultivate. But then the training is to train in freedom, to train in liberation, to have a feeling for liberation. And with that feeling of liberation, begin to expand that feeling or that sense or that experience until our life just feels free. And then we'll find that there's plenty of motivation within.

Chances are then your life will respond appropriately to what's needed within yourself and the world around you. And the idea of living not selfishly, but living appropriately for the welfare of all beings everywhere, for the welfare of oneself, the welfare of others, the welfare of self and others, and the welfare for the whole world, is what the Buddha was talking about. So may your practice bring you to the point where you have, you know what the training is about, what the practice is about. And that's and then, as when you really know that for yourself, then they say, the Buddha said, then you become independent in the Dharma. When you have a clear enough reference point for the training, clear enough reference point for freedom, then you become independent, the Dharma, because you know now for yourself what it's about. So those are my thoughts for today, and on this independence weekend that we that some of us are celebrating and some of us are not.

The a and b Let's always celebrate the possibility of inner freedom. So thank you for being here. And what we've started on these Sundays now is that those of you'd like, we can transition over to a different meeting a little bit. It's meant to be kind of a community meeting. Those of you who come to Sunday morning, who'd like to meet other people and who are doing this, and be a little more in community, a and be part of this a little bit. Discussions may be about the Dharma talk and what came up, and maybe you won't discuss a little bit. What feeling or experience have you had? A freedom that can be a reference point for you in your life.

So that is to transition over to a room, and Iying Chen, it will be your moderator and facilitate. She's one of the teachers here at IMC, and she can answer some of your questions. But she can also I see also that some point I put you into out groups of about five people, so you can come and meet each other and have a little discussion about fifteen minutes. The whole thing's about thirty minutes, but it kind of starts and takes a few minutes to start. So it starts in about five or ten minutes. And I think the whole room is now open, and you can just go there and start chatting with Yang, and then when enough people have come, you'll kind of start more officially.

And so there's the link for the zoom is at the very top of this chat, if you can scroll up to near the top. Not the very top, but maybe four, five down. It's also in the IMC calendar. So if you go on IMC's website and the bottom, there's a little calendar on the bottom left, and you click on the Community Meeting, Community Discussion Group. That's there. You'll see the link there. There's a second link, and you need a password, and the password is mettā, mettā, mettā, and that will bring you into the room.

And also, when I finish it down from here and go over to the other computer, I'll post the link again at near the bottom of the page. You now on the chat, so you don't have to scroll a way at the top. And if you go to it right away, you can. Before it disappears up, you can click on it and then go right there. So thank you very much.