

2020-08-02 John Lewis and Preservering with Non-harming

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SPEAKERS

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So one of the really important qualities for life or Dhamma practice is perseverance and the idea of a long term vision of practice. We have in the vipassana community, insight practice, great emphasis on attention to the present moment here and now. And if but if that's done, too exclusively, it's shortchanges us. Because a very important part of human life is also the vision of what's possible into the future, what we work towards. We enter the present moment as fully as we can, to support our ability to fulfill that vision of freedom, of personal development, of making a difference in making the world better. And that perseverance to continue and with practice is a very important quality because with all things, there's ups and downs and challenges, and to just persevere and continue and continue. Over time, amazing things began happening in practice, just with regularity and continuity.

Many years ago. Some years ago, some friends of mine bought about 30 years ago, some friends of mine went to hear the Dalai Lama. And they came back and told the story of being there. It was a big amphitheater in Arizona. Big Stadium, I guess many, many people, thousands of people there. And Dalai Lama was giving like a weekend teachings. He was teaching much to the weekend and I guess periodically he would take questions from the audience. And this man stood up to ask a question, and asked what's the fastest way to enlightenment? The Dalai Lama, as the report goes, stood there quietly for a long time, didn't say anything. And at some point, he started crying. A little bit tears going down his cheeks. And then at some point, he spoke. And he spoke about how something like, I wasn't there so I can't recapture you know, express his words, exactly, but how I remember them, that he was quite sad about this idea of the quickest way to enlightenment, that there's a certain kind of greed and sort of maybe even arrogance sometimes that we have to get, you know, the fastest quickest that the point of practice is to get enlightened enlightenment. But sometimes, for the Dalai Lama, there's kind of a long term vision, long term vision for his people in Tibet, the long term vision of practice, and to steadily persevere and to practice and grow and develop. Too often when people are pushing their

practice too quickly, like for enlightenment, and they have some significant experiences that are very meaningful. But if there's too much of an emphasis on that, the long term growth and development of all of who we are the fullness of who we are all aspects of ourselves get shortchanged that the full maturation of person in Buddhism takes time. It's something we have to persevere and with life challenges and involvements, and just keep going. When there's stories told of all the farmers in the Mediterranean, who when they get old, maybe in their 70s and 80s that they'll plant olive trees, still be planting olive trees, even though they all have trees. It will take 20 years for them to start bearing fruit. And the fruit and that chances are those trees will not bear fruit in their lifetime. They're not planting the trees for themselves. They're planning they have a vision of what's possible in the future. And so they're kind of planting seeds for what's going to come into the future. When I had the good fortune of meeting, a wonderful Buddhist monk named Maha Ghosananda. He was considered the Gandhi of India of Cambodia. When the Pol Pot, you know, genocide, slaughter, do you know millions of Cambodians, in 1976, there were 60,000 Buddhist monks in Cambodia. By the time the genocide finished in three years later, there are only 3000 left still alive. And Maha Ghosananda was one of them and he survived because he was living in Thailand at that time.

And, and there's a Jack Kornfield went to see him once, knew him in Thailand. They were in the same monastery for a while practicing. And without Ajahn Chah. And Maha Ghosananda went to the refugee camps and the Thai Cambodian border to support them to minister to the Cambodian refugees. And he was warned not to go there. Both the Thai government didn't want him there. And, apparently the Pol Pot also didn't want him there. And, he was threatened with his life. But he would go anyway. And some of these refugees hadn't seen a Buddhist monk for a long time, and have a Buddhist monk came was quite impactful for them. And the story goes of him standing up on the stage with thousands of people in the refugee camp all around him. And he started chanting, some of the familiar chants that they knew they hadn't heard for a long time. And imagine there's this huge trauma. Maha Ghosananda himself lost his entire family, his friends, his communities that were left in Cambodia. They died or killed. So here he is, Maha Ghosananda comes up on this stage and open an area with thousands of refugees around. And he starts chanting, and they start crying, hearing what they hear. But one of the chants he, he chanted, which apparently they knew, and they would recite it back to him or with him, was the simple chant. That hate is never overcome by hate. By love alone is hate overcome. This is the ancient truth. So the what is what a phenomenal thing to come message to bring into refugee camps where probably many of those refugees had seen horrendous, horrendous things happen to their people and lost their country and so much and he came with that message of hope. When I met him, he had already gone back to Cambodia the end of the Pol Pot times he'd been there for I think maybe about 10 years, helping with the reconstruction of the country and bring peace to the country. And I met him from breakfast one day, and I had the good fortune of being sitting together. And, and so I asked him a question. Maybe it was, maybe it was a little bit rude, but I really sincerely wanted to find out what he would say as an answer. And, and I had learned that he had spent time dedicating himself to tree planting in Cambodia among as many things that he did. And I asked him said, Why do you as a Buddhist monk, spend time planting trees? You know, you could be teaching, training new monks, you know, all kinds of things, but why planting trees? Hear this old man said he was probably

when I talked to him. He was probably in his 80s route around that maybe around 80 years old. And he looked at me very kindly. And he said, The Buddha was born under a tree, was enlightened under a tree, taught under a tree and died under trees. So that's all he said in reply. But I heard him you know that he thought trees were really important and a place for the Dharma, a place of practice, a place where people can connect to something really important. And here he was planting trees, trees that probably would never come to maturity in his lifetime. But he was also planting for the future he had this longer vision of what was possible and this idea of Have persevering and the longer vision and, you know, not to lose track of this bigger span of time that we live in and how things come and they go and they change and how the past is really close by in the future is not far away. And that what we do now can have a huge impact for the future. What we do now is to be connected to where or what's happening in society is connected to the past.

And I was struck by this, this last week when I read in the Washington Post, a story of a man named Daniel Smith 80 year old 88 year old man who father's father had in late in life. His father was 70 when he was born and Um, so, you know, 88 and he said 157, so 157 years before the now, I guess that his father was born. And that's a phenomenal length of time. And it turns out, that was in 1863. Turns out his father was born a slave in Alabama, in the American South. And here we have today living in Virginia, a man whose father was born a slave. You know, I read about American history and in schools and it just seemed like that was like far away ancient times. But I can't imagine that for Daniel Smith isn't so ancient, and he his father, and he witnessed all the cycles of Jim Crow laws and racial segregation and all the rules and laws and ways of preventing African American blacks to vote, he was part of the civil rights movement and saw this coming and going of all this stuff. And he said that when much of his life, the hundred and 57 years since his father's birth, had once seen seemed like a huge gap like this is empty space. But that now, the time strikes him as distressingly brief. He said this time feels like an accordion with the time just folding back, folding down coming back together. So the impact of the past 157 years still lives in so many different ways in this country. And what happens today? What happens now these years can live 157 years into the future, to have this long term vision. What is the world that we are contributing to what are they all live trees they were planting. What's going to what do we do now to do we are we interested in the world of the future? And do we want to live in such a way that we are caring for future generations of people?

One of the remarkable people we've been reading about this last week is John Lewis. And he was, I love I'm very inspired by he and his colleagues, who in the 1960s were dedicated to the movement of non violent civil disobedience that disciples of Gandhi and the American tradition of Henry Thoreau, where there was a very strong dedication to non violence and a training in non violence. And then that takes perseverance that takes dedication, the ability to strength to persevere against tremendous odds. And, and the willingness in a certain way to be physically harmed for the sake of freedom for the sake of justice. It's a remarkable thing. It's kind of kind of counterintuitive for some people, but it creates a greater good, I think John Lewis created greater good than if he'd picked up a rifle and a gun and hated and shot and was violent with people. His example of non violence and others people like him was a turning point of American history with the civil rights movement.

And in the story he's tells of this remarkable story. You know, he, by time he was 20, 20 or 23 he'd been arrested 24 times. By the time he was that age, he'd been beat up many times. He was one of the first to have the Freedom Riders who took buses, insisted they could sit on buses, when desegregation happened, but in the south, people weren't allowing it yet. And one of the tactics him and his colleagues had was to go into waiting rooms, in bus stops, they were segregated whites on the waiting rooms, and they would be attacked with bats and crates and all kinds of things. And they would keep doing it. Keep doing it. And in these stories of what happened, so I'll tell you one story of someone who came to me at the retreat. She had been, I don't know, the freedom rider, but she had been a civil rights worker, a white person who had gone down to the south during the 1960s. And she is stood on a street corner with friends, doing a non violence, silent protest against racism down there. And, and then, at some point, a pickup truck came up with a bunch of white men who were opposed to them standing there. And these white men jumped out of the pickup truck and started to beat them up with their fists. The next day, her hundred friends went back to the same place to protest again, the same pickup truck came with the same men, they jumped out and beat them up. Third day, she said to me, they jumped out. They were there again, the same men came. And I guess there was a man who came and was standing over her. And he had his fist poised to strike her again. And he looked down into her eyes. They looked at each other. And he's he stopped, and he said, What in the world are you doing? And that day, there was no more beating up. That day was the beginning of a dialogue, you start having a conversation with men. I don't know what the follow up was. But the idea of being able to change someone who is violent and hateful, through our willingness to be present for it and to protest takes perseverance takes dedication. I think Buddhist practice with his tremendous dedication on non harming is also very aligned with the idea of civil disobedience to stay public. Present, to not succumb to hate. That's where the perseverance is most powerful, to not succumb to hate. And to stay there, not succumb to violence. This is this is the power that is practice we do, can bring us and can be an expression of it in our lives. So John Lewis, this is wonderful story. So when he was going to the south going into these all white waiting, waiting rooms, and in Montgomery, he did it. And sure enough, immediately these bunch of white people attacked him and his friends. And apparently he was hit over the head with a crate and was ended up unconscious and maybe ended up in the hospital. He had a lifelong scar in his head from this particular event. And so this happened over and over again.

When Barack Obama became president. The there was a man in the south who had been there in Montgomery in that waiting room. And he had lots of hate and lots lots and lots of hate towards black people. And there's no shortage of expressing it to others and turns out when Barack Obama was elected as president, he liked what he saw in Barack Obama. And he started to have remorse for how he'd been the 1960s. And he went to find people to apologize for how he had been a racist back then. Remarkably, he went and found John Lewis, because he was a person who had hit us to create to knock him out. He was the most, you know, the most vicious of the people attacking John Lewis. And he went and found John Lewis and he apologized. And John Lewis accepted it and forgave him.

So this idea so the perseverance a lot, you're 40 years later or something like that 30 years later, that 40 years later that that it took that long for John Lewis is non violent civil disobedience and his willingness to stand there and be hurt in that tremendous fight for justice. That's this man, also his name is Elvin Wilson. Elvin Wilson had his heart changed. So are we living for the present only? Or are we living also for the future? This is very important when it comes to things like Hate, hate, which I think maybe should be better explain There's hostility, that hostility causes tremendous harm down through the generations. hostility is a way of harming oneself. The person who's hostile, hurts themselves. And I think of hostility is really coming from the kind of the surface of the heart. It comes from a lack of confidence in the depth and strength of the heart. It comes from a reaction of pain, of anger, of frustration, and a certain kind of miss confidence, the confidence that violence or hostility is effective. And it's only effective at the best for a temporary relief if it's successful to get something to go away. But it hostility always harms the hospital. And so this is what becomes clear when we sit and meditate. When we start awakening the inner life and the inner life, the heart becomes more and more clear what's going on, then we start feeling the impact that things like hostility have. And we start maybe feeling it's not worth it, we shouldn't do this, that there's better places to come from. So a simple thing to two simple things to say is, you know, that the you know, we might have anger towards people of a different political persuasion? And some of them upset us quite about quite a bit. And recently someone asked me, How can I have compassion for these people? Who I'm so opposed with? And my reply was first overcome your hostility, first have no hate. Then we'll talk about compassion that to leapfrog over the inner work to resolve to free ourselves from hostility and hate to leapfrog over that into compassion because it's so great ideal doesn't I don't believe it's really very effective. And so to look at our really work through what's going on with us, how hostility is always a surface phenomena, we're not really deeply connected and rooted in ourselves when we're acting from hostility. And so to really discover that and explore it and be with it, and to remember that what like the first ethical principle in Buddhism is non harming. No question about that's the first principle and if there's anything that We are, you know, we have this teaching of Buddhism of not self which is, but if there's something that we are the self that we this is a minimum the self that we should be is, if we have hostility, we should be, we are the one who refrains. We are the person that refrains from causing harm, and to have confidence in that person to validate that's where, if that's where strength resides, that's where personal power resides. That's where all kinds of good things inside of us, isn't that restraint. When there's no longer need for restraint, because there's no more hostility. Then Then, maybe we drop the idea that that's who we are. And we don't need to be that anymore. But this is so important this idea of not causing harm.

So restraint, training ourselves, being willing to look for an alternative way to take care of and deal with difficulties and challenges, alternative to hostility. And to see that as something that's going to last for way beyond your lifetime. We live in this vast scope of time, and things come and they go the challenges of human life. They come and they go, and we are in our own challenging times. It's not an exception to the pattern of human humanity to be in these kinds of times when there's lots of hostility and hate unfortunately, But we can be the people who don't hate but not to be passive. But no matter what side of political persuasion you might be, to be dedicated to not being hostile to not hating, that's

where strength can be. And then perhaps we can meet each other and find our way. Maybe week, maybe there is a third way, a different way that no one knows yet. That doesn't have to be in this caught in the grip of oppositional politics. Maybe there's a way in which non harming and a real dedication to, to, uh, to civil disobedience, opposing what we feel is wrong and non harmful way can help all of us find a third way, a new way can create the future conditions for all kinds of trees to grow in 20, 30, 40 years, all kinds of things to change and in the slow way that sometimes they change.

May all of us have the perseverance, dedication and the restraint of John Lewis. May all of us have the fortitude and dedication of a Maha Ghosananda. May all of us plant trees that will last long beyond our lifetime, so that we are planting seeds of peace, seeds of goodness, seeds of how that of welfare and mutual respect for all people. May all people live at peace. Thank you