

2020-11-11 Eightfold Path-Right Action (2 of 3)

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SPEAKERS

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So as today I speak about the second precept, the second form of right action that the Buddha taught – not taking what is not given. Perhaps we can consider it to be a corollary to being generous, to giving what's not asked for. And generosity is always non obligatory. Giving might be obligatory, but generosity is open handed, free will, offering something to people that's not expected or required. And this intimate connection, I think and feel, between not taking what is not given. And then practicing generosity. And giving what's not asked for.

So we're talking about the fourth step of the Eightfold Path, which is right action. And right action is described in three ways: not killing, not taking what is not given, and not engaging in sexual misconduct. And these, kind of the bigger, more forms of action that can cause a lot of harm in the world. And part of the foundation of this whole eightfold path is to live a life that doesn't cause harm. And being concerned with that, but really feeling inside the tremendous value of dedication to avoiding intentionally causing harm. And unintentionally, if we can help it.

And the angle I'd like to take today on this not taking what is not given, is that it's a training. We're training ourself, developing ourselves, good qualities, wholesome qualities. Part of the Eightfold Path, as I've been saying, is a recognition that there are such things as wholesome and qualities of actions and activities of heart and mind, which are useful to cultivate and develop. That support the ongoing development of a harmless life. That supports the ongoing development of the eightfold path to freedom. Or supports the ongoing expansion of our freedom, once we've experienced it.

So taking what's not given, is not the same thing as not stealing. Because it's a little bit of a higher bar. It's a higher kind of care, attention. That unless something's clearly offered, we don't take it. And there might be things where we don't think it's stealing, But still it hasn't really clearly been offered. And so we wait until it's been offered. You come to someone's house and there's some kind of snack out. And seems like it's pretty clear that the snack is out for the guests to be there. But in the Buddhist training,

we would wait until the host clearly offers, here have some snacks. We wouldn't assume that even though it seems like that's meant for us, assume that's the case. Now that might be kind of a small, petty kind of example, or maybe not very inspiring. But it begins training us. It begins cultivating good qualities. And so there are a number of good qualities that come with the practice of waiting until something is offered and not rushing ahead and being acquisitive, or just wanting a lot. And so one of them is restraint. And restraint is probably not a very popular Dharma topic in Dharma talks here in the West. There's something about restraint for people in the United States that feels like a loss of liberty and kind of a closing down and like repression almost. But restraint in Buddhism is a very highly valued activity action. And it's the opposite of losing our liberty. It's actually exercising our liberty so that we don't give in to forces of attachment, forces of clinging. We don't get caught in these drives and compulsions that are a loss of freedom. Even though we might act freely in, there's a freedom in being compulsive. The compulsion has freedom and there's a doing, an activity, but we're not really free if we're acting on compulsion.

So to this kind of restraint, that helps us discover our freedom, discover our strength, discover our ability to choose. And simply not picking up snacks from someone's home if they haven't offered them seems pretty small. But to train there to not compulsively go and eat the snack, but to learn how to hold one's ground, be still, not get into compulsion and desire. And restrain oneself, is developing a strength. And you don't know when you're going to need that strength. Maybe you don't need it with a snack at someone's home. But there are times in life where you might avoid causing a lot of harm because you've learned how to restrain the things you want to say or things that you want to do. And in the exchange with restraint, healthy restraint, is staying close to the place of goodness, of goodwill, the freedom that we have.

So develop this capacity of restraint. Again, maybe restraint is a bad word in some people's minds. They've been told to kind of not to restrain themselves in ways in the past that were clearly detrimental. But maybe instead of the word restraint, we can use the word the idea of not picking up, not giving in, to the compulsions. So don't give in. Don't pick up your anger, pick up your greed. To leave it alone, leave it alone. And maybe this idea, just leave it alone, the compulsions that come along, might feel better, and maybe more to the point than the idea of restraint.

The other part of training in seeing this second precept as a training, when people commit themselves to the precepts, that's how it's worded. I commit myself to the training of not taking what's not given. That's a little bit different than the rule or the ethical moral principle of not taking what's not given. But rather, there's a feeling Oh, here's a place of training, I develop myself. I'm on the path of freedom, how do I develop myself and grow the qualities that flower into freedom?

So the other thing that can come with practicing not taking what is not given is, we have a chance to explore the area of contentment. And maybe there's greater, you have greater capacity to be content, to be at peace, to be at ease, to breathe easily, without the grip or the push of desires and wanting

and not wanting. Contentment is a fantastic quality. And to be able to walk through the world content, fully engaged in the world, doing things. But not ahead of ourselves, not rushing, not caught up in the next thing to do or to do it quickly. But just be there in a content way and do something wholeheartedly. And so when something hasn't been given to us that we want, it's an opportunity to practice contentment, explore contentment, discover contentment. Not taking what is not given is also an act of generosity. It's generous to the host, in a certain way. That the host learns to trust us, oh, this person is good, I can leave this person in my house, this person is not going to take anything. Some people, especially monastics, practice not taking what is not given to such an extent that if there's a book on the table in the living room, they wouldn't actually pick it up unless the host has offered them to go you can look at it, okay. Maybe that seems kind of extreme for lay life. But to be ourselves, a person who's trustable. Other people really trust us, that we're not going to take anything, we're not going to take advantage on them. Is a beautiful gift to give. Many people don't have trust in their lives and don't trust people. That terrible things happen to them and suffer a lot. And to really be around someone who's integrity is so great and so trustable. It's a wonderful thing. It's inspiring. It's healing for others to be around such a person sometimes.

And also not taking what's not given involves cultivating certain wisdom, interpersonal wisdom. To be attuned to what taking means in interpersonal dimensions. What it's like to be offered something and what kind of relationship, healthy relationship, does that allow? And how do we use it to connect and deepen our connections to people through generosity, to take what's not given, to understanding other people and respecting others and caring for other people. There's this whole dimension, interpersonal dimension, that's an important part of the training of the Eightfold Path. And we see this, it's really inherent in these middle sections of eightfold path, with right speech, right action and right livelihood. That we're doing it for ourselves and we're doing it for the world around us. These are actions that our interpersonal nature, killing, not taking what's not given, sexual misconduct, not causing harm through our sexuality. So these are trainings, we're taking on these precepts. Partly to develop ourselves, to grow ourselves, to mature in. So it's not punitive, it's not only limitation, it's not only abstaining from doing something. Because that that's not very inspiring. And to only have these rules, training rules, not killing, taking what is not given, or sexual misconduct. To only have them as rules of restraint and what we're not going to do, might actually shortchange ourselves from the full potential of what these can allow and make room for.

So you might today, in these next 24 hours, to explore this topic of not taking what is not given. Are there opportunities in your life, where you can make sense to, yes, this is not given, therefore, I'm not going to take it. But not to do it as just simply abstention, but use it as a clue, as a catalyst, to cultivate other qualities inside of you. To cultivate the capacity and let go of compulsion, compulsive desire, to cultivate contentment, to find the contentment that may be already here, available here, to cultivate generosity. And one of the wonderful alchemies of spiritual life is to for some things, turn them around and do the opposite. So if you feel like you want something and you can't have it, turn around and give something instead. So practice generosity. And practice cultivating wisdom. What is it about the

interpersonal field? What can you learn? What can you develop? What can you deepen in not taking what's not given? So it's not just about you avoid, not keeping a moral precept. But how is it really deepen and connect you more fully to those people? At least in your heart. And what can you learn from both not taking what's not given and also generosity, that deepens the relationships with others, that are characterized by freedom. Because freedom is really the primary hallmark of what the Eightfold Path is about.

So, thank you. And I hope that you have a generous day and delight in wherever you can be content for this next day. Thank you.