

Relationship at the Heart of Dharma

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So good morning to all of you and welcome, happy to be here with you. And for those of you who are attending online, hello and welcome. It adds a kind of richness to have you along online.

And so, we could say that today is momentous day in that it's the last day of 2023 and tomorrow or at midnight, we usher in 2024. And I think there's maybe a tradition of people wanting to give inspiring, hopeful messages for the new year. (audience laughing) And it would be nice if I did that today. (audience laughing) And maybe I will. You'll have to decide.

But as I think ahead for 2024, I think that we're gonna have a lot of challenges what's coming. And I mean, the level of, the speed in which the climate is changing is surprising the people who were warning us that it was gonna change. It's happening faster than we expected. It looks like we, I know it's way too early to tell whether we'll go into drought again in California, but the snow levels are quite low again all across the Western parts of this country. And, you know, we can list all these things and changes. Some of the wars that are being fought currently today, we don't see any end for tomorrow. They'll continue into 2024. And some of them might get worse, might expand and stretch and the ways in which the wars spill over across their borders to other borders, to other countries around the world to create more and more division seems to be increasing. And that'll probably continue into 2024.

And it's, there's certain reasonable scenarios for this country is that the presidential election will be very difficult. And we don't know who will end up being president, elected president in November. Chances are that there's gonna be a big part of the population is quite challenged and upset by this. So as we look forward to some of the challenges that are coming in 2024, one of the things that is important to consider is to prepare ourselves for this, to prepare ourselves for November so it's not a shock and surprise. So we're prepared, we're ready for whatever comes. We're prepared for the challenges of this country that who knows how much stronger they'll become.

And so to be prepared. And I think this mindfulness practice we do, Buddhist practice is a preparation, is meant to be a preparation for the challenges we face in our life. Most commonly it's talked about the existential challenges of sickness, old age and death. But the Buddha frequently enough addressed the social challenges of his times and how the practice was also meant to address those as well.

So we make this big turn in a sense, tonight at midnight or 10.30 at IMC. [audience laughing] And we're making a lot, some of us are making a lot to do about nothing. Because nothing actually happens on midnight today. I mean, nothing real in the world. I mean, it's kind of an odd New Year's time. Some cultures have New Years at a time where it kind of corresponds with astronomical changes. Like it'd make more sense to have, wouldn't it make more sense to have the New Year's on solstice? You

know, they mark something real. And not only does it mark something real, it actually marks kind of a fallacy. That, you know, it's the end of the 12th month of the year, but we call it the 10th month in Latin, December. You know, it's kind of a confusion that, you know, November is the ninth month and October is the eighth month. And then we call the, then, you know, September the seventh month. So we're confused in our language, at least.

And then we come to this, you know, New Year's. It's a convention and it's an unusual convention that was somehow invented by people, probably men a long time ago. It's not even a lunar calendar that goes on. So in a sense, in some very real way, it's an existentially thing. New Year's does not exist. It's a convention. It's a convention, a concept, ideas, that humans somehow have created. And much of the world lives by it. And much of the world has other calendars as well.

One of the great things about living in the Bay Area is that you could celebrate New Year's much through the year because there's so many different cultures here with different calendars. You know, for a long time, the Chinese New Year's was maybe still big, but it was big. And it was a big alternative to the Gregorian calendar New Year. But now there's all kinds of other ones as well. And there's the Buddhist New Year that happens in April. So, you know, we just keep celebrating. So it's a convention. But actually, conventions are important. And that's the emphasis for this talk today. That conventions are something that we create in relationship to each other. And we either participate or don't participate. But if we participate in the conventions, we're actually participating in a way of relating to each other, to the world. And we might think it's silly to emphasize this around the calendar, but it's actually true. It's one of infinite number of conventions, of bridges, of networking that reaches out to how we're actually connected to other people.

For those of us who speak English here, English is a language which is connecting all of us as I speak. We share it, it's a bridge. It's a relationship. Languages are all relational. There's a relationship that's happening with all of you as I speak. Relationship that happens to you as you listen to me. And there's a relationship that all of you share in being part of this together, listening to this together through the English language. What is being conveyed through the conventions that we share? What's traveling on this, if we may use this language, from the wavelength or the sound waves, what's being carried along with it?

I watched a movie last night with my family, and boy, was there a lot of swearing. And it wasn't just swearing, it was actually talking meanly to other people. It was like really heavy. I mean, they were emphasizing it in the movie, so it was kind of like part of the movie, right? But wow, how can people be so mean to each other? And in the way they were talking, they were conveying, so the relationship was something really unfortunate, something painful, something harmful was being conveyed in the very words they spoke. And then a little bit as part of the purpose of the movie was to show a transformation of people. And you could see that at some point after the transformation, a few of these people happened, that their language became much softer and kinder, and there were little tears in

their eyes as they spoke and cared for each other. So that was very nice.

But we have so many ways in which we, this network of relatedness is happening. And one of them that we all share here in this country is this change. And for some of us, it's kind of like, you know, it doesn't really matter that much. I mean, we kind of do something at my house at nine o'clock. (audience laughing) With the excuse that that's like New York Times where kind of, we don't even turn it on to watch, it's just like, okay. And then it's important for our children. And one of our neighbors who knows, wants us to do it for the children, which is my wife buys M&Ms. And she, at the kitchen table where my kids eat breakfast, it says the new year is written out in M&Ms. So it'll say, you know, 2024. Kids wake up and they get M&Ms. You know, the one that, you know, they're 21 and 25, so. (audience laughing) I mean, my neighbor who loves this tradition, I think is about 60, wants us to do it. She's not coming over for the M&Ms, she just likes the idea.

So it's a tradition that we have, and it's a way of related to each other and caring for each other, loving each other, connecting that we have this tradition that we do. So there's something in this new year that, you know, knits our family a little bit together. That's nice. So these relationships.

So, for better or worse, Buddhism is a religion. And as a religion, it tends to offer fundamental, for Buddhists, fundamental, universal orientations, values, understandings of this life that we're living in. And what I'd like to suggest is that through the Buddhist lens, this world of ours is not made from atoms. It's not made from electrons or protons. It's not made of quarks and gluons and these subatomic particles. That's not what this world is made of, most fundamentally. That the world is made of relationships between things. Nothing exists without being in relationship to something else. Nothing exists that doesn't come from something, doesn't interact with something, so it's known and has a purpose or has some existence. Nothing exists that doesn't have some impact beyond itself.

And whether it's, you know, whether what was first, was there some kind of fundamental matter first that became, exploded in the Big Bang? And then there were relationships of everything? Or was it, was a relationship first and then? So that's kind of like a chicken-egg question. And the Buddha never answered such a question because he felt that there's a beginningless time. There was no beginning.

But the emphasis is not on what's important, it's not the things of the world, like atoms. What's important is not the events of the world, how people relate, how people are doing, what they're doing and all kinds of things in the world. But rather it's the relationship we have with it. The relationship we have with ourselves. The relationship we have with the different things happening with ourselves. Relationship to our thoughts, our feelings, our motivations. The relationship to the events of our lives. The difficulties and challenges, our illnesses and our dying and the wars of our society and our world. It's in the relationship that they're formed. That's the fundamental basis of life from a Buddhist point of view.

And so what we're doing in Buddhism is having insight and understanding and transformations about the ways in which that relationship happens. This is what's key. So if we're focusing on money, like the

purpose of life is to be wealthy or have money, and it's just about the money, then we lose sight of that money is really a relationship. Money has a certain relationship. It allows us to do things and connect to other people and have an influence and effect on the world. It was kind of transformative for me financially or like in terms of money that I live on Dhana. So the money that I live with is what's given to me out of people's freely given donations that I don't ask for anything. It's just like people seem to want to support me. As a Dharma teacher.

So that money to me has, in my mind at least, has a spin. It comes with a relationship of people who value something about the Dharma, who value something, certain values, certain way of living. So I feel like I have a responsibility or a desire or an inspiration to continue that spin in how I spend the money. So I wouldn't use the money I receive from Dhana to go out and buy cigarettes or guns. That would just seem completely kind of disrespectful or worse for what has, the relationship that money represents. So I would like to use it for good in the world. And to think about that, how do I do that? And sometimes because of that, when I go someplace and say, well, this is kind of expensive. And I'll tell myself, well, it'll just support the people who somehow receive it. That's good for them. I receive support, I'm happy to support them, it's okay.

I don't know if that inspires you or not, but it inspires me. And so the relationship, what is the relationship we're contributing? What's the relationship we're forming? What's the impact we have? If it's all about me, myself, and mine, it's too easy for that to sever relationships. It's too easy for that to dismiss how related we are so that we are more likely than not, then causing harm rather than benefit. So how do we live our life in the world of relationships, not in the world of things? How do we live in the world of relationships in a way that supports and helps everyone in this world? It's kind of the, is one of the fundamental principles of the Buddha's teachings. [clears throat]

So I would like to propose that, to use a non-Buddhist word, that it is in the relationships we have with ourselves, with others, and the world, that we discover what is sacred. That's where the sacredness is. Sacred is not in some thing out there, but it's found in the relatedness that we have. It's that important. And for Buddhists, the word I'm using for sacred is the word dharma. Dharma is sacred for Buddhists. And dharma is about relationships. And the most classic way of talking about it, I talk about dependent co-arising. That things arise in dependence on other things. Things are realized in relationship to other things existing. This is a fundamental principles of the teaching. The dharma is found in relationships. That's where it's found. Dharma is not personal or impersonal. It's not in oneself or in the world. It is embedded in everything we are in relationship with. It's in that relationship.

So we do, in a sense, find it within, but it's not really personal. We do find it externally. It's not really impersonal. It's all about what is the relationship we have. For humans, the known universe is sacred because we live in relationship with it. The known universe is sacred. I think this idea of known, the world that we know, however wide we can know it, however far our imagination can stretch, whether it's to the edges of your home, to your block, to the city, to the country, to the world, to the cosmos,

however far you can imagine, the relationship we have to it, that's what's sacred. And so if the world is sacred, it's because our imagination stretches out to include the world. It's in how we relate and are related to that we find the greatest meaning, value, healing, and liberation. The most important values and things we want for our lives is found in something, some quality of relatedness to something.

And so the quality of relating and the object of greatest reverence is not what's on the other side of a relationship. It is how we relate. So it's not an object out there that we revere, but rather the reverence in Buddhism of what is that relatedness? How do we relate? How are we interacting? What are we bringing with us? What are we seeing? What are we intending? What are we supporting? What qualities in that bridge, in that relatedness, that way we use conventions and language and speech and actions in relationship to others, what are we conveying in it? Do we think about it? Do we become unconscious where we don't care about other people? If we drive on the freeway without any concern for others, you are still relating to the others on the freeway. But you're not taking responsibility or taking care or attention to what is the relationship being formed there. It's sacred. It can be sacred how you drive your car. If driving your car, you're considering the relationships, all the circles of relationships that are coming into play. Do you drive on the freeway to make it a better driving experience for the other drivers? Or are they all obstacles to you having a good driving experience?

And so, you know, and so you use your finger to let them know. Or do you drive such a way that's easier for other people? So then we come into this relationships, then the heart of the Dharma that we teach the Buddhist, the heart of Buddhist teachings is non-harming. An ancient teaching is that the primary characteristic of the Dharma is non-harming. If there's any harming involved with Buddhism, then it's not the Dharma. The primary characteristic, primary reference point for understanding the Dharma is non-harming. And non-harming is a relational issue with ourselves not to harm ourselves, with others not to harm others. This means non-harming in all our relationships, including to the animals and to the natural world. The teachings of the Buddha was actually held this up as a very, very high value. The universal emphasis on non-harming the Buddha gave is a challenge for us living the lives we live, for most of us. And so is it a challenge that we're willing to accept, to live with, to relate to in a way that is healthy and helpful? Or do we just shut down and say, well, it's impossible to live a non-harming life and then not think about it again.

And it's possible that one of the most important relationships to rectify, to clarify, to create, move into this non-harming way is the relationship we have with ourselves. Violence causing harm harms the one who is violent. Sometimes more fully than to who violence is directed.

So this emphasis on relationships, all relationships I'd like to propose evocatively, provocatively, and kind of as a catalyst for you to think about this, see how it might be true. Relationships are stories. Every relationship is a story, can be explained as a narrative. This happened, this is how we relate, this is how it unfolded.

So it's been said that the world is not made of atoms, it's made of relationships, made of stories. What

stories do you live by? Are your stories one that empower? Are your stories one that create peace, bring love, bring friendship, bring kindness, bring support, that bring respect for everything that you encounter? Or do you have a story that you maybe unconsciously live by that does the opposite of that, that is disrespect, disregard? Certain things, story is that certain things are not important enough to pay attention to or to care for. A story that some people don't count.

Some people are, we have a world filled with people who are treating each other as subhuman, treating each other as monsters. And this is partly the reason why people can wage war, because of the stories that are told about how terrible other people are. So what are the stories? So what story do you bring to everything you do? Some people say we need new stories. I don't know if we need new stories, because I don't know if there's any new stories. There's been a lot of stories down through history. We just need to choose the right stories. There's a lot to choose from.

The Buddha had a story, and I like that story. I think that's the new story, even though it's 2,500 years old. And stories that heal, stories that unite, stories of mutual support and care, stories of peace through nonviolence. We can't solve a problem with the problem itself. Can't overcome violence with violence, greed with greed. We can't overcome the problems of overconsumption with more consumption. We can't overcome the problem of depleting natural resources by taking up more natural resources. In the world of conflict, we can't solve conflict with more conflict. We can't end divisions by continuing to be divisive. We can't end fighting by fighting more.

We don't find self-respect by disrespecting others. We don't find happiness by denying happiness to others. We don't find safety by making others unsafe. We don't overcome selfishness through more selfishness. So with the Dharma, the fundamental aspect of Dharma is non-harming, so nonviolence. Nonviolence is always myopic. For the powerful, violence can be successful sometimes in the short term, but not in the long term.

And that happens in small ways, between people, between friends, between families and spouses, that people use power and kind of violent language, violent assertions to get their way. And they do. I was successful. I was angry and yelled at them and they stopped doing what they did. Great. But then something shuts down in the other person. That person no longer trusts. That person no longer is willing to present to themselves. The relationship now has been severed in some way. Can it ever be healed? It might look like it. People pretend. People go along.

So the old story, the Buddha had this wonderful teaching, I think, maybe painful to hear, but maybe not pleasant to hear. But this is the old story. That should be the new story. The killer begets a killer. One who conquers begets a conqueror. The abuser begets abuse. The reviler begets one who reviles. I don't know if this is universally true, but I kind of believe it's more true than not. That when we cause harm in the world, we don't create a conditions in the world where the world is going to be safe for ourselves. And so often wars create more wars. They create people who are deeply hurt and traumatized. And so one of the things they respond to is 20 years later, 10 years later, is to fight more.

So I don't know whether the data behind this quote is completely accurate, but even if it's half accurate or a quarter accurate, I think it's a meaningful quote. It's by a man named Walter Wink. He was writing in the, I think in the 1990s, so in the last century. In 1989, 13 nations comprising 1.6 billion people experienced nonviolent revolutions that succeeded beyond anyone's wildest expectations. If we add all the countries touched by major nonviolent actions in our century, the Philippines, South Africa, the independence movement in India, the figure reaches 3.3 billion people, a staggering 65% of humanity back then. All this in the teeth of the assertion, endlessly repeated, that nonviolence doesn't work in the real world.

We don't remember. There's something about we remember violence, we don't remember nonviolence very well. Soon after Sandy Hook, there was a man, very similar, who had an assault rifle and 500 rounds of ammunition, was able to force himself around the security at a school of inunder kids. He was gonna try to shoot as many as he could. Somehow he ended up being holed up in an office with two hostages. One of the hostages, who was really scared, started talking to him. Her name is Antoinette Tuff. She started talking to him. And she started off by telling him the challenges she has in her life. That her husband had died, and that she wanted to commit suicide, or she had wanted to commit suicide. She started talking to him about their shared grief, their shared challenges in life. She started telling him, "You don't have to die today." Life will still bring you about turns, "but we can learn from it."

She said that as she started this conversation, she started because she saw that this man who wanted to kill was a sick person who could be cared for. And when he said that, when she kind of finally started this conversation with him, that before she started it, he had shot his weapon once, I think into the floor of the room there. And the police had done a barrage of shots through the door that didn't hit anyone. So it was kind of a tense situation. She has a conversation with him. And when he kind of helped him understand that maybe he was better off turning himself in, she praised him. "You're a good person." I love you. "I'm proud of you." And at some point he put down his gun, and they opened the door, and that was the end of it.

We don't remember this event. We remember Sandy Hook. Shouldn't we be remembering this? Isn't this monumental? That how many people it saved? That this act of nonviolence, this act of love and care had such a huge impact? This makes a difference.

So one of my heroes is a man named Michael Nagler, who's a professor of peace studies at UC Berkeley for 40 years. And I got this story from him. He has a book, his most recent book on nonviolence called "The Third Dimension." And he says he studied these kinds of situations, these kinds of people have done this much more often than we realize. And he says they have four things in common. You see a distraught person as a suffering person, not a threat or a monster. You show the person they are not alone in their grief. You share your personal pain with them. You offer one way or the other the teaching this too will pass. And then the way he writes it, you buck up the person. You buck the person

up. You kind of praise them or do something positive. Because many times these people have never been bullied or never seen with respect.

I find it remarkable that in his study, these are the four principles he sees that's in common with so many of these things that don't make the news enough. This is what can change the world.

So therefore, respect or love of one's opponents is pragmatically useful. I think this is kind of a teaching from his book. Respect or love for one's opponents is pragmatically useful in being a technique that distinguishes the deeds from the doers. This increases the possibility of the doers changing their behavior and hopefully their belief.

So this talk is kind of centered around this idea of nonviolence. But the reason for that is that this is, in Buddhism, is that this is a central principle that guides us into what is sacred, into what has the greatest value. Which is that it guides us into the story that orients all the relationships we have to everything, to events, to things, to people, to this world. It's fundamentally a relationship of non-harming. That's the bottom line. Above that, there are a few things like love, generosity, and kindness, and respect.

And this is not necessarily unique to Buddhism, but I wanted to read a somewhat famous passage for those who know it. In India, I think, in the Mahabharata, in the 17th chapter. So the Sanskrit word for nonviolence, non-harming, is ahimsa. Many of you probably know it. Ahimsa is the highest virtue. Ahimsa is the highest self-control. Ahimsa is the greatest gift. Ahimsa is the best suffering. Isn't that fascinating? Ahimsa is the best suffering? If you're gonna suffer, suffer because of that. Ahimsa is the highest sacrifice.

In the United States, we have this idea that the higher sacrifice is what? To die for your country? In war? Ahimsa is the finest strength. Ahimsa is the greatest friend. Ahimsa is the greatest happiness. Ahimsa is the highest truth. And Ahimsa is the greatest teaching.

So as we come to this momentous transformation that'll happen at midnight. (audience laughing) Or 1030, or nine in my house. We are voluntarily, you didn't realize that, maybe you're reluctantly doing it, but participating in a mass movement of a way to re-relate to each other, a bridge, a network, a connectivity that we all have. And when we celebrate New Year's Eve, maybe we're celebrating those relationships. And it's arbitrary that this is the New Year's Eve, that we call it that. But it's not arbitrary the way that we're related to each other. And you could just ignore this one, and just go to sleep. That's fine.

But don't ignore all the different ways that you see. Don't ignore this fact that we're related to each other. Don't ignore the fact that the fundamental way of taking care of yourself is in taking care of the relationships you have. With everything, yourself, with your atoms, with other people, with the natural world. It's in relatedness we discover, in relationship we discover the Dharma. It's in the relationships that we discover where we cling, and where we're generous, where we're hostile, have animosity, and where we have love. It's in the relationship to things that we discover wisdom, and our foolishness, and our delusion.

It's in the world of relatedness we discover how to be free. Free of all that harms, intentionally harms, purposely harms. And that clears the room, clears the room in our hearts for the best qualities of the heart to come forth. Because if the heart did anything, the metaphorical heart, it's the deepest, most valuable place from which we can relate to anything and everything.

May it be that as we go into this new year and prepare ourselves for all the challenges that come, that we let our heart, that deep place within, be the place where each of our worlds begins. That if we want to create a peaceful world, a loving world, don't wait for other people to do it. Don't wait for your politicians to do it. It begins with you, with how you relate to the people close to you, how you contribute to harmonious harmony and peace, and the people you know, and how that community then relates to the bigger communities and the bigger communities. Let it flow from you.

And let that be the place where you rest. Let that be the place where you're ready for whatever comes. Even though the world comes with tremendous challenges that are overwhelming for all of us, as they are right now for others in Gaza, in Ukraine, in Somalia, and the list goes on and on and on, the places where people are living under horrendous challenges. It might be our turn next. Be ready in such a way that you always remember that the world begins with your heart, your world that you relate to, your relatedness. That's where it is.

And this practice can support you and help you and help you find how to rest from a place that always is creating a good world from you. And who knows what you'll be asked to do. The woman who talked the shooter out of shooting. Until that moment, until that day, she was the public eye for the news and the books that wrote, and all these things that, she was an ordinary person, maybe like you. But something came her way and she responded to it and related to it in a way.

So who knows what's coming for all of us? Let's be ready. Let's use 2024 not to have hope for what it's gonna bring, but have hope for how we can relate to whatever comes. We can use this practice. This practice is powerful. And you give yourself to this practice well, this practice will show you the way to relate in a way that's beneficial for yourself and this world. May it be so. Thank you.

So we do have a potluck here in a few minutes. And so those of you who are staying, maybe you can take a few minutes to say hello to each other and welcome each other. So maybe turn around to a couple of people around you. And not just the people who are new, especially can feel more connected and maybe more interested to stay. Thank you.