

# Core Teachings (4 of 5) Natural Care

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Hello, everyone. Welcome to the fourth talk where I try to articulate the core ideas that underlie my teaching and and motivate and guide me in how I teach. I hope this is a clear way to let people know what I'm about. Some of you have been listening to me for a long time and it feels like the responsible thing for me to be very direct about what I think are my core orientations and perspectives as a teacher.

Yesterday I talked about the strong naturalistic orientation in how I teach and practice. There's a perspective that there is a natural functioning within us that benefits us and that we tap into and allow to move through us and awaken in us. As we orient toward suffering and the end of suffering, as we free ourselves from fixed ideas and fixed views, that gives room for this natural functioning of ours to operate, in the same way that keeping a cut clean allows the natural healing of the body to heal the cut.

Similarly, when our hearts get broken, we metaphorically keep the heart clean, don't interfere with its natural working, and give room for the pain. Then there is a natural healing, a movement toward health. The heart knows what to do better than our thinking mind, the engineering mind, the mind that tries to figure out or understand.

To sit in meditation and get out of our own way and not only do the practice but also be practiced by the practice. We allow ourselves to be changed and moved by the deeper instinctual movement that happens within us. It's not our doing. Over time, we learn that a lot of the things that we do interfere with the movement toward freedom and liberation.

So one of the core aspects of this naturalistic orientation is that there is within us a natural movement toward – to use a category word – the whole phenomenon of love, the whole movement of the heart that we can have. One of the deepest movements is the instinct to nurture, to care for that which we value, that which we love, and that which we are touched by or moved by.

Sometimes that caring is done for those with whom we feel closest. Sometimes it's done for small babies. I knew a man who volunteered in the local hospital to work with premature babies who needed to be held and have physical contact in order to develop normally. That was his volunteer job: just to hold premature babies. Doing this changed him, softened him, and opened him over the time that he did it.

Some people have this relationship with animals – little puppies or kittens to whom something happens, or an injured bird that we gently take care of. Some of us have been at the bedsides of people who are dying. Sometimes they're dying slowly and peacefully, and there's a deep tenderness, a deep feeling of love and care at that bedside.

As we settle and get quiet in meditation these very human capacities we have are operating. I like to think of them as independent of our thinking, constructing, reactive, imaginary mind – the mind that builds up stories and images of ourselves and lives in these cathedrals and cities of concepts. They are culturally, familially, and personally created. We don't even realize how much we are conditioned by our culture, our society, our language, and our family. Our very ideas of who we are as a self, who we are in relation to other people, and even how we are oriented toward others are very deep, culturally conditioned phenomena. We take them for granted and we think this is the way it is.

Along with that come the ideas that, of course, we're angry or aversive; of course, we set up strong boundaries between you and me; of course, we have desires; and of course, we protect ourselves. All these things build up a very complicated world that's very fragile, easily disrupted, and easily hurt.

But in meditation, if we get quiet and peaceful enough, we go through layers and layers of the active, constructing mind that makes up stories, imagines, and has beliefs. It's phenomenal to realize how many layers of conditioning we have and to come down to a place where a deeper operating system can function, one of which has to do with love, care, and compassion. Then when we have contact with suffering in the world, despair, anguish, a sense of hopelessness, and a sense of overwhelm don't arise. We don't suffer more because we're in contact with suffering, but rather, suffering awakens an instinct for compassion, an instinct to care for what is suffering.

This happened to me when I was practicing in a Buddhist monastery, my first time in a monastery. I was there for about three years. That was amazingly significant for me. I used to call meditation a "tenderizer," like what you put on meat to tenderize meat and soften it up. Maybe it's an unfortunate metaphor, but I felt as if my heart was being tenderized and softened by the practice of meditation in the monastery.

And I was amazed that there were places responding to the world that were not me. This was not the usual Gil – not how I knew myself. Wanting to respond to the suffering of the world felt like an instinct, a completely unintended awakening of compassion and love. This became central to who I became, who I am. It wasn't really me in the usual sense of the term. It was more me than anything else could be me, but there was no me in it.

And that's where I wanted to live my life from. Specifically, responding with compassion to the suffering of the world became the only thing that made sense, the only response to the world that I had. That is when I decided to devote my life to Buddhist practice. Because I was in a Zen monastery, I decided then to become a Zen monk and a Zen priest. That was the only way I knew to address human suffering at its deepest roots.

There are many other important ways of addressing it, but because of the depth of compassion I had discovered, I felt that I had to somehow try to respond from that deep place to the deep place in others in order to bring suffering to an end. That's when I decided to be ordained. That ordination was very significant for me because it set in place in my mind a certain kind of commitment. Maybe "commitment" sounds as if there is too much self in it; maybe it was a clear recognition, acknowledgment, and acceptance of the fact that responding with compassion to the suffering of the world was what my life was about. That set me on a course that certainly brings me here today.

So for the last almost 50 years, this has been my life – dedicating my life to addressing, meeting, and caring for the suffering of the world. In the many years of practice, I began to appreciate and understand different aspects and flavors of the deeper operating system of love, compassion, and care. In different circumstances, different qualities of it get evoked, awakened, and operate for us all.

In terms of my core teachings, this naturalistic tendency has led me to a deep faith, trust, or reverence for this place within. It is way too limiting to call it "mind," say it's within me, or define myself by it. It's almost as if I get out of the way for this to operate and be there. I have a kind of reverence for this instinct of love and compassion, a sense that it is almost sacred because it's not about me. It's about nature – nature knowing nature, and nature relating to nature, nature caring for nature. So this is a core aspect that is behind my teaching and a core aspect of who I am. I believe that this is at the foundation of what motivates me in pretty much everything I do. Thank you for the chance to share this. There will be one more talk on the topic of my core teachings tomorrow. Thank you.