

# Core Teachings (5 of 5) Liberation

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Welcome to the fifth talk where I try to offer a description of the core, foundational teachings that I base the rest of my teaching on. These also might be what, in some ways, motivate me to teach. I'll review what we have done this week so far.

First, I place attention to sensitivity to suffering and the end of suffering at the center of the Dharma that I teach. The possibility of meeting and ending suffering in the world and in oneself in a deep way is one of the most profound things I know of that a person can do. There are many wonderful things to do in the world, but I believe fundamentally that one of the most wonderful things is to bring suffering to an end, either for oneself or by working to support others to do that. Then whatever other wonderful things we do, we do in reference to that freedom from suffering. It makes everything else more meaningful or valuable because it conveys that possibility for others as well.

The end of suffering is supported by not holding on to any fixed views. There is a freedom from views. Certainly, human beings project a tremendous amount of concepts, ideas, judgments, and biases onto others, onto reality, and onto themselves. We do that with our spiritual practice as well. One of the key qualities of the kind of Buddhism that I am oriented toward is not holding on to any views as ultimate religious views. Even the idea that "this is the truth" is a dangerous territory that lends itself to putting one more view on top of things. Certainly, there are understandings and perspectives that are invaluable. But there's a way in which, as our practice goes deeper, we rely less and less on perspectives, less and less on views, interpretations, and even Buddhist teachings. Ultimately we need to be freed of Buddhism too.

Then there is the naturalistic aspect of the teachings. With the absence of views, there's a way in which we're being very present here and now so that there is a natural unfolding. There's a natural way in which we operate, which we can stay close to. We don't have to rely on things that require views, including views of the supernatural or things we can't know directly from our own experience.

The connection to direct experience is not just direct experience for its own sake, but a medium through which the natural healthy processing, unfolding, and evolving of our heart, our mind, our spirituality, and our freedom can occur. We want to stay close to that. Part of that naturalism that we stay close to is a natural capacity for positive social emotions that involve care, compassion, loving-kindness, and empathy.

This is part of the awakening that happens in Buddhism – the awakening of the sensitive heart that can be attuned to the welfare of others, the suffering of others, and ourselves.

But we attune to suffering without being distressed or troubled, without being caught up in views of self and others, meaning, victims, and even views of responsibility and obligation to others. There's a radical way in which we set free this beautiful human sensitivity that can inform us, guide us, and motivate us. That is part of the naturalistic movement, as opposed to the projections of responsibilities, obligations, shoulds, shouldn'ts, good person, and bad person.

As sensitivity to others' suffering deepens, it also deepens toward ourselves. The remarkable thing about the path of liberation is that it becomes a more and more subtle sensitivity to suffering. At some point, you can't really call it suffering anymore, in the way that the world thinks of suffering as big. Suffering becomes a very

subtle stress or tension that we carry deep in our psyche, deep in our minds. It underlies everything that we're addressing on this path.

Today we come to one of the fundamental orientations in my teaching: that there is liberation and a path to liberation. The path to liberation is a naturalistic path that unfolds, opens up, and shows itself as mindfulness, stability, concentration, and steadiness of the heart and mind become deeper and deeper. Then we can feel the onward leading nature of the path to the end of suffering. There is a call, a motivation, a desire for that end, which is not a projection or an attachment, but a completely natural desire that is healthy to go along with.

In the naturalistic way that I like to teach or understand the Dharma, I use a very physical, ordinary example that could be seen as somewhat reductionistic or materialistic but it speaks to the naturalistic nature of what happens in this deep path of liberation. The example I often like to use is to close your fist tightly. If you do a really good job holding a tight fist, almost until your hand goes numb or it hurts, without injuring yourself, you'll start feeling a natural tendency to relax the grip.

If you want to do this as an exercise, really do a good job – enough to feel proud of how well you can keep that fist constantly tight. Then I'll tell a story. In ancient India, they had a way of catching monkeys. It turns out that monkeys love sweets. So a monkey hunter would carve out a slot in the outside of a coconut and hollow the inside, put candy in it, and then tie the coconut to a tree. The monkey would come along and know the candy was in there. It could only get the hand in through that slot by opening its hand. The monkey would put its hand in and hold on to the candy, but then its hand was fisted up. It couldn't pull its hand out because it didn't want to let go of the candy. So the monkey could not get free of the coconut. Since the coconut was tied, the hunter just came along and picked up the monkey and it was caught.

As I told that story, were you able to maintain that tight fist? Were you a little bit distracted by me and by the story? If you were, then you probably felt a little release. You can let go now of your fist if you'd like. That is a little release of letting go. The natural tendency of tension, holding muscles tightly, is that the muscles want to relax and let go. So whether it's physical, emotional, or mental tension, the nature of that tension is to want to relax.

Maybe saying it wants to let go is anthropomorphizing a bit, but that's the onward-leading nature of holding on. It takes energy to keep tension going. It is tiring to keep expending that energy. The movement is toward letting go of any tension. All suffering comes with tension. All suffering comes with a certain kind of work, believe it or not. We can feel the work, the tension, and how there's almost a desire to let go, to release.

The path of liberation opens up through being sensitized to this desire to let go of tension, seeing and following the movement toward deeper and deeper letting go. This is what our whole psychophysical system most wants, more than any other desire. What we find is that the desire to let go is a natural desire. It's a desire that comes without tension. I call it "the biological imperative to liberation."

In my own practice, my own path of liberation, how deep and thorough the possibility of freedom from suffering can be made a huge impact on me. The Buddhist teaching that there is an end to suffering is real. It is possible to end suffering. The completeness and fullness of freedom that's possible has taught me that, even though sometimes the ending of suffering is temporary and suffering comes back afterward, experiencing even temporarily the complete letting go that this tradition points to as possible is a radical transformation.

That becomes the guide for the rest of the path. Yes, it's important to address suffering directly and bring it to an end. Yes, views, no matter how subtle get in the way of the deepest letting go that we can do. Yes, this is a natural process we're involved in, which we cannot orchestrate, and in the end, we cannot make happen. Yes, the natural desire for the ending of suffering is a deep form of care, compassion, and love. And yes, there is a path. Yes, deep, deep liberation is possible.

So liberation is what underlies the background of what I teach. There was a time before we had to remodel IMC when in the wall opposite where I sit teaching, for the teacher's sake, high up on the wall was a synonym for liberation to remind me and other teachers that all the teachings in some way are moving in this direction. Liberation is what this practice is about.

I'd like to believe that everything else in Buddhism is an extension of this or builds on it. Buddhism is founded on liberation. I teach that this is a worthwhile goal for the world. We don't just seek liberation for ourselves. We do it to benefit and support everyone. Some of us need to take this path all the way to the end so that everyone sees that it's possible, there's hope. We don't have to keep living in a world of strife, animosity, and greed. We don't have to always be caught in building up or protecting the self. We can experience a radical freedom. It's equivalent to the airlines telling you to put on your air mask for yourself first and then help others.

I hope that these teachings have been useful for you to understand me and what's underneath my teachings. I'm very grateful for this opportunity to teach this way and let you know, and for all my opportunities to be able to teach. I feel so fortunate to have the opportunity to share something that is so profound for me and allows me to give expression to my care and compassion for the world that we live in. Thank you very much.