Core Teachings Pt 2 (3 of 5) Naturalistic Practice

June 19, 2024

SUMMARY KEYWORDS yoniso, direct experience, two operating systems, wholesome, unwholesome, greed, hate, delusion, surface, reactions, concepts, conceits, self, me, myself, mine, constructs, imagine, fantasies, made-up, holistic, wisdom, love, generosity, Don Quixote, embryo, gestation, fight-and-flight, approach-and-nurture, get out of the way, allow, make space, tension, nourishment, attention, faith, equanimity, peace, joy, happiness, attending, sel-preoccupation, self-criticism, self-concepts, faith, gardener

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Hello everyone, and welcome to the third talk where, building on what I said last week, I try to convey some of the core teachings that underlie my orientation as a Buddhist teacher.

The topic for today is that my teachings are based on a very strong naturalistic orientation. By “naturalistic” I mean that it's in the world of our direct experience – things we can know and experience for ourselves. We don't have to explain things that we can't really know or discover. This is not to dismiss the supernatural world, which is often such a big part of religion and Buddhism as well, or say that it's wrong or untrue. The supernatural is just not the orientation from which I teach. I put it aside, as it's not something we have to address or deal with for this path of liberation, this path of practice, or for living a life of compassion and love.

The naturalistic approach can be explained a little bit by pointing out that in the early Buddhist teachings, it appears that when the Buddha taught, he presented the human being as having two separate operating systems that are not really comparable or equal. They operate almost like apples and oranges. They're very different from each other.

One is wholesome and one is unwholesome. The unwholesome operating system is the one that is founded on greed, hate, and delusion. As deep as they might seem in human beings, I think of greed, hate, and delusion as much more surface reactions to things. They engage our surface muscles, our surface thoughts, and our ideas, concepts, and conceits of self – I, myself, and mine, what I want, and who I am – which is kind of an overlay on top of a broader, wider experience of what it is to be a human being.

The operating system that's founded on greed, hate, and delusion is also one that constructs and engineers. It imagines, thinks about things, and builds up stories. It's the world of make-believe, making things up. Most of us don't think we live in a world that's make-believe. But I remember reading Don Quixote, a wonderful novel. In a conventional way, Don Coyote was living in a world of delusion. But by the end of the book, it seemed that everyone else was living and navigating in a socially constructed world of rules, behavior, and concepts that seemed normal but was more delusional than Don Coyote’s world. And he was living by fundamentally beautiful values. That raised the question, what is delusion and what is not delusion?

The constructed world that we live in, which we inherit from our society, teaches us profound things about who we are, and who we think we are – the constructed self. The other operating system of the Buddha can be simply called the “holistic” side of our life. It arises from a deeper source within. It's a source of life, thoughts, emotions, and motivations that are not made up. It does not involve a made-up world of concepts and constructs. It does not involve greed, hate, and delusion.

It arises from deep within, maybe from the opposite of greed, hate, and delusion – from generosity, love, and wisdom. It might arise from an organic source within, meaning that it's something we don't construct, but allow to grow. We can build and construct a house, but we cannot build and construct a baby. We can allow the natural capacities of gestation to cause the embryo to grow and develop over time. It's remarkable that something that's so much more complex than a house can somehow grow and evolve and develop. The task of a mother is to allow the best conditions for that life to unfold and develop within.

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It's not a coincidence that I use gestation as an example. The Buddha talks about the yoniso as a source of this deeper way of living and a place where life begins. For humans, that's sometimes considered to be the womb. So there's a place where life gestates. It emerges from deep within and is not constructed.

These two operating systems are very different ways of relating to experience. In one, we engage in it and fight with it and fix and adjust it. In the other one, we have to get out of the way and allow it; we have to recognize it and make room and space for it. The wonderfulness of the Dharma practice is that being mindful, awake, and present has different effects on these two operating systems. The operating system that is based on greed, hate, and delusion is a system that's based on tension. When we're aware of and present for it, this tends to help the tension relax.

The operating system that's gestational and emergent, has more room to grow, unfold, develop, and move with the food and nourishment of attention and the space of attention. Then attachments tend to move towards letting go. The deep wisdom, the deep compassion, the deep faith, the deep equanimity, the deep peace of awakening, and the joy and happiness of practice grow from this deeper source.

I associate these two operating systems with the difference between fight-and-flight and approach-and-nurture. The fight-and-flight instinct engages the surface muscles; it's a muscular thing. To nurture, support, and tend to something is like a gardener tends to a plant. Attending is a deeper instinct, a deeper motivation. Something deeper than our musculature is operating. We can only speculate about exactly what that biological source is. But for the Buddha, it was not of the muscles, not of the flesh. It was something deeper within.

Saying my orientation is naturalistic means valuing something that's very natural about human beings, which is healthy, wonderful, and capable of healing, development, and growth. One thing this operating system wants to grow into is freedom from the restrictions and limitations that the greed, hate, and delusion operating system provide – the tension that holds us in check.

You might consider that you have these two different operating systems, and ask which of them you have faith in. Which of them do you feed, support, and strengthen over time by participating and engaging in it? Part of Dharma practice is to have a deep faith in this natural source within us that arises and operates more when the constructing mind and the conceited sense of self, the “me, myself, and mine,” quiet down and make room for it.

It's remarkable how much self-preoccupation, self-criticism, and how many self-concepts we live under that we can put down. We can have faith; we don't have to continue that way. We can let go of the faith we have in me, myself, and mine – the preoccupation, concern, and thinking over and over again about me as the central character of my drama and my life.

We can let go into something deeper inside that's growing and wants to emerge. To continue with the metaphor of human beings growing as an embryo within, one wonderful experience I had as a young parent when my kids were young, was the seemingly natural way in which I became less important. My own concerns and preoccupations with self fell away just by caring for a young baby. Sometimes I was quite tired; sometimes there was no time to take a shower. Occasionally I had to take care of the kid rather than even eating when I was hungry. I stayed up late at night when the kid was sick, knowing the next day I'd be tired when I taught the Dharma. The usual way in which I had maybe been involved in my own concerns kind of fell away, and that felt so freeing and wonderful.

So to have faith in this natural operating system that we have, and not have faith in what we're describing as unnatural: the constructed, imaginary, make-believe concepts that we often live in.

Thank you very much and we'll continue this topic tomorrow. Before we end, I want to take a moment to celebrate with you that this is Juneteenth Day. It's a wonderful holiday. Any holiday that celebrates independence and freedom is a Buddhist holiday. As Buddhists focusing on liberation, it is wonderful to celebrate the worldly liberation that's so important and that has been such a long time coming for the slaves in America. Thank you.