

Wisdom, Care, and the Paramis

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And so for this talk, I want to start in a different way. I would like to, partly to make a point, better maybe, to do a little ritual with you. Some of you who don't like ritual will call it theater. And for this I need four volunteers. There are four envelopes here and in each envelope there's a question. And so you would read the question when the time comes.

So don't open the envelope until it's your time. Maybe it's good to use the mic, yes. And maybe the other mic is there. Yes. So up here in the front, because, what's your name? Mohit. Mohit is number one, so each of you have a number.

So if you, once you have the mic, Phil, if you can bring it to Mohit here. All right, there. Okay. So, so now you can open it and ask the question. From where comes love? From wisdom.

So then number two. From where comes wisdom? From love. Number three. Where's number three? Oh, so she needs the mic. What is love? To care. What is wisdom? To care well.

So, the topic today is wisdom. And, but wisdom can seem abstract. It can seem heady. It can seem like it has nothing to do with love. And maybe that's the case sometimes. But in the teachings of the Buddha, there's a distinction that he sometimes makes, so I don't know if he makes it, but it stands out as I read the text, between wisdom and being a wise person.

Wisdom can be found in a book. And as long as it stays in the book, it doesn't benefit anyone. Being a wise person is found in living a life. And that's what the Buddha was emphasizing, was how we live our life. And so the purpose of wisdom is to live wisely. And so, but what does it mean to live wisely?

What is this wise? And in that little question and answer we did, I'm putting love and wisdom closely together, which they often are not. And so I want to read a quote from one of my

favorite teachings from the Buddha. Some of you have heard me do it before, because I like it so much. And it's the Buddha's description or definition of a wise person.

Wise people of great wisdom do not think of harming themselves, of harming others, or of harming both. Rather, wise people consider their own welfare, the welfare of others, the welfare of both, and the welfare of the whole world. In this way, one is a wise person of great wisdom." So here, the wisdom that's being emphasized, the way of being a wise person, is to have in your heart, to have in your field of concern, the welfare of self, the welfare of others, the welfare of both, and the welfare of the whole world. And that means to care. To care for the world, to care for oneself. And how do we care for ourselves well? That takes wisdom.

How do we learn how to care well? Well, that takes love. Because here, wisdom is not apart from a relationship to other people. Sometimes when we focus on Buddhism or the Buddhist teachings and Buddhist practice, it can have, at times in an appropriate way, a kind of a very personal orientation. You sit and close your eyes and meditate and you're kind of like, you know, tuning the world out and others out and you're quieting your mind. So you're not thinking about, you know, who you're going to give a gift to over the holidays. You're just sitting here with your own breathing.

And the kind of stereotypical criticism of people who meditate is that they're just watching their belly button. You know, it really gets focused. But there's a way in which that's appropriate to do that. And how it fits into this definition of wise person, there's something profound that can happen when the attention gets organized, unified, collected, here in the present moment, so that it awakens within us a feeling of wholeness, a feeling of wholesome, wholeness that can happen. Feeling of *samādhī* that is a holistic state of phenomenal well-being.

Now it's possible to be focused on that for the purposes of just being your own pleasure, or your own relief from the difficulties of life. But in the Buddhist teachings, this deep experience of *samādhī*, of wholeness, really kind of going inward, is to be turned inside out. You have to go in, but then you get turned inside out, so that the focus now becomes, how do we care? How do we meet the world? How do we meet ourselves in a caring way?

And so the inward focus that is part of Buddhism is not supposed to leave us isolated from the world or not attuned to the world. It's meant to do the exact opposite. And just like if you really want to care for people well, and really have people relax around you and just really feel like you're accessible and they're happy to sit next to you and be close, maybe even happy for you to give them a hug in the right circumstance. It would be useful from time to time you really went into a very private, into your own privacy, away from all people and took a shower. So sometimes that's what, you know, meditation does. You're just cleaning up,

getting cleansed of the inside, inside-outs, and then you're ready, come out, and you come out in a whole different way for the world.

So, So the development of this caring wisdom, wise caring, is to come to a place where it's possible to care for the whole world. And that includes the people who are our enemies, the people who have betrayed us, and the people who have offended us in all kinds of ways. That's a tall order. That's not easy to do. It's easy. It's not difficult. I mean, it's very difficult to deal with one's own hurt, one's own pain, one's own fear, to be able to have it that big. And that's one of the purposes of this inward focus, is to really address and meet all the barriers, all the unresolved ways we are, all the wounds we carry, so that we can get turned inside out and be able to have care for everyone.

And maybe in this context, we don't need to use the word love. That kind of is, for many people, a high bar, or it becomes something maybe too hallmarky. But care is really much more humble, much more basic, and I would say very profound, to offer care. To care for the whole world. No one left out.

And so to learn this wisdom, to understand this wisdom, does not require books, book reading. It doesn't require Dharma talk. But stay until the end, please. It doesn't require exceptional knowledge. It doesn't require mystical states or supernatural experiences. And it doesn't involve metaphysical ideas, abstract metaphysical ideas.

What it involves is a deeper sensitivity in oneself, a deeper sensitivity to well-being. To where sense of your own welfare is. Because the more you have a sense of welfare for yourself, what brings your own goodness, the more two things will happen. You'll appreciate that's possible for other people. And you'll have a profound appreciation for what it feels like to care for others. It feels good. It adds to that well-being. It can, done the right way.

And so, in some of the path models of Buddhism, like where you begin, there's a number of different path models that have different beginnings. But one of them, called the *pāramīs*, the ten perfections, begins with generosity. And generosity is relational. You can be generous to yourself, but it's very easy then to be selfish. But it's possible. But generosity is generally considered to be something we do for others and for the world.

And the idea of generosity is it's non-obligatory. So it has to be that the source inside from which it comes cannot be logical or reasoned out. Because then it's not quite generosity, though reason and rationality can have a role. And it certainly, as I said, can't be obligatory, can't be a duty. Because generosity is something that's freely given from some generative source inside. Some feeling of openness, some feeling of delight, some feeling of care for the

person that you're giving it to. You want that the other person would like it.

If we have cultivated a capacity of mindfulness for ourselves, we can feel the joy, the delight, the pleasure that this kind of generosity can be. If there isn't some kind of pleasure in being generous, it probably isn't being generous. It has a good feeling, this lightening and offering and freeing of something and offering it out. And we can feel how we're a better person because of it. We can also feel the joy, hopefully, that it brings other people. And so it can bring us joy and satisfaction, the fact that we've offered something to someone else.

And it can affect our interpersonal relationships with others. It tends to create positive interpersonal relationships to be generous. Chances are it's more likely to create positive interpersonal relationships than being stingy, which isn't usually held up for good friendships. And so there tends to be a field of mutual appreciation, maybe gratitude, maybe even mutual gratitude. I felt very grateful sometimes when I've been able to give something to someone because I feel so lucky. It does me good. It's so nice. So I want to say thank you to them. But there's gratitude and appreciation.

And there's something that I learned in Zen that when you give, you don't give casually, like look the other way and hand it to them as if it's nothing. Even if it's a small thing, the relationship is important. The respect is important. So in Zen, you're supposed to give something with two hands. So it's really like all of you is present. And you're present for the other person that you're giving to. And so because that relationship is important, the respect and care is important. And so it creates a kind of positivity in the interpersonal sphere.

Some people use generosity, maybe it's not generous always, but use giving as a way of healing interpersonal relationships that are strained. Or to shift the inner dynamic. It's hard to be angry at someone or be mean to them at work or something if they've given you a gift. You know, they came with cookies for you, or they came and gave you something. Or maybe you came out of the parking lot at work and your tire was flat and you didn't know what to do and the very person you've been mean with all day long, they came over and said, oh, I'll help you. I know how to change the tires or fix it. And like, what? Next day, you know, you're not going to probably start, you know, being mean again. Not right away. So generosity, giving, is sometimes used to do something good for interpersonal relationships.

So in terms of wisdom, what was very important, what I just described, was all the good feelings that arose in that act of generosity. Something softened inside, something warmed inside, something relaxed maybe, something, some joy or delight or pleasure arose in one way or the other in that act of generosity. And it's in the interpersonal relationship. And in this path model, that's where Buddhism begins. If you want to start practicing Buddhism,

don't start with meditation. Start with generosity.

And so what does that do to you, to a person who has that feeling of well-being? One of the things it does to you, the person, is become more sensitive to how that is diminished, how that's broken, how that is taken away. So you feel the goodness of something, the generosity, and now you have a reference point for what not to do because that would cause harm. To cause harm to yourself by maybe diminishing or breaking the relationship, breaking the kind of inspiration that you're coming from, the goodness you're coming from. That if you felt kind of lousy and miserable and stressed out to begin with, you know, it's like not a big deal to do something with your middle finger. Like, you know, that doesn't make anything worse. You know, so might as well. But if you're feeling good and calm and peaceful, you can feel that a certain way of using your middle finger actually diminishes you, actually harms you, your welfare, takes something away. And so why would you do it?

So the more you have the sense of well-being, the more you recognize and feel that there's the difference between what brings harm and what brings welfare. And that is the key aspect of this wisdom that I'm highlighting today. The wisdom to be able to see, feel, know experientially, this brings harm, this brings benefit. So then, so the generosity then sets the stage for that. That's part of the function as a part of the path model.

The second step in this path model is virtuous conduct. And virtuous conduct is primarily defined by, in this early tradition, by restraining yourself from causing harm. So you would abstain from killing people or physically harming them. You'd abstain from stealing from people. You'd abstain from causing harm to people through your sexual behavior. And you would avoid lying. And you would avoid intoxicating your mind, making your mind kind of confused and maybe crazy. And so these are considered virtuous conduct to avoid these things.

Why would you do that? Well, one reason is if you develop this warmer sensitivity to others through generosity, you can feel how doing those unvirtuous things diminishes the joy, diminishes the quality of the relationships. So you have a foundation for appreciating why it's important to be ethical, where it no longer becomes a rule to be followed. But rather an inspiration to maintain something good, to avoid causing harm to yourself and causing harm to others. Because in order to intentionally cause harm to others, it involves a fracturing of the wholeness of self. It involves diminishing the wholesome kind of joy and well-being that the Dharma practice is kind of developing in people and growing in people.

Now, it's considered in the teachings of the Buddha that avoiding those five things, not killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxication, is a gift we give the world. And maybe,

usually we don't think of it that way, but it doesn't take a lot of analysis to appreciate how much killing, stealing, sexual harm, lying, intoxication goes on in our society. It's tremendously damaging. And the only thing it seems to benefit is politicians. And newspapers who write about it. But what would the news be like if the whole world stopped doing those things? It would be dramatically different than what we consume now in the main news of the day. And so it's a gift to the world.

For you to meet someone who you feel their ethical integrity is so good that you feel safe with them is remarkable. I've met transformed people who I trusted deeply. I trusted them in a certain kind of way to my son when he was 18. And the people who were transformed had been, actually were still, lifers in prison who had murdered someone. I mean, that's considered some of the worst of the people. But they had gone through the GRIP program that we've had presentations here about in such a thorough and transformative way that it was remarkable to feel that transformation in them. So I was able to bring my son when he was 18, just old enough, to get clearance to go to St. Quentin and sit in a room of 30 lifers who were there because of murder. And I was a little bit worried. But it was remarkable to feel how they've been changed. It's possible to change. People can be transformed. And And so this idea of ethics and how good that is.

And classically in Buddhism, that being ethical, by abstaining from these five things, is meant to be a source of joy. And this is something I couldn't understand when I first came to Buddhism. I thought it was weird that people felt joy because they were ethical. Because I had nothing in my background that made sense of that. And then when I went to Thailand, and my first retreat there was ten weeks long. And ten weeks is a long time to be in silence and to practice. And in the course of that retreat, something shifted inside, some kind of settling, relaxing, calming, opening, a sense of well-being, a sense of, I remember feeling very, very clean on the inside. Remember the shower? So very clean on the inside. And lo and behold, I felt this joy. For not being inclined to doing anything unethical.

And it came up a little bit in the course of that, that there had been, before I went there, I'd met this woman that I had a certain, you know, I hope this doesn't offend anyone, something that bordered on lust. Probably not lust. Something bordering on it. And then when I was sitting in that retreat, I could feel that I had no inclination in that direction. That having that actually felt like I was going to harm myself. And I felt this joy not having that kind of unhealthy relationship to another person. And so, So again, to live an ethical life creates a different reference point for wisdom because it shows us what causes harm and what causes benefit in ourselves, in others, in the relationship between others, between self and others,

and then maybe to the whole world.

So then the third step of getting to what's called the perfection of wisdom, so we're building here. So the third step in this path model is a topic I talked about a few weeks ago, which popularly is at least thought to be unpopular, is renunciation. But the thing is that it's after these first two. So now the practitioner has gathered a lot of information. They've learned a lot about what feels good. Not just good in some hedonistic way, but what feels good ethically, what feels good interpersonally, what feels good coming from our heart, coming from a deep generative place inside. And so, from there, it makes sense to begin letting go. Of course.

I remember when I took my kids to school when they were young, I would get up and meditate, and usually they would, or I tried to meditate, because they'd get up early. And then I had this great idea, this fantasy, it would be so great, I'll be meditating, and they'll come, and really young, they'll come in, I'd have them sit on my lap, and I'd put my shawl on, and it'll be such a wonderful conditioning for them, influence, and then they'll just feel the goodness of that and meditate together. So sure enough they wake up early, sure enough they'd be willing to sit on my lap, and it lasted half a second. So I was never fulfilled in that area of parenting. But I would feel kind of good, and anyway, just been sitting a little bit or whatever I did, and But by the time I'd made breakfast for the kids, got them dressed, drove the carpool to school, I was ready to come back and take a nap. But one of the things, I said, this is exhausting, this is stressful, what's going on? This is back in the old days, in the ancient times, where they had something called newspapers. And so it turned out every morning I wanted to read the newspaper. But that was what made the whole morning stressful because it made much like I didn't have enough time for all the other steps. So I had to renounce the newspaper. And I was so much happier. Because I knew there was happiness. I knew there was well-being. I knew there was harm. And so something that I enjoyed doing had to go for the greater good. So that was a renunciation.

So to know good, goodness, to know that being stressful, stressing out, is you're losing something when you get stressed. The Dharma question is why be stressed? Why agree to being stressed? Why go along with the forces inside that cause you stress? Some of you will have brilliant answers to that, why you should be stressed. What I'd like to encourage you is, don't argue with me, but engage those mental lawyers that are justifying stress and really question them, really engage in a deep conversation with it. Is it really better, is it really worthwhile to allow yourself to get stressed? I've known, for example, at times that I've been stressed and trying to do something and then I had to do it over again. It would have been faster if I had

done it calmly the first time.

So, but anyway, the sense of caring, beginning to care deeply for yourself. Care enough to not be stressed, care enough not to sacrifice your own well-being for greed, for hatred, care enough so that you do the kind of things that nourish and support a profoundly inspiring inner life, so that your inner life inspires you. Wow, can you believe this? There's something here which is maybe not me, but it's better than me, which is this generative place of goodness or warmth or wholesomeness that can live inside of us. And so renunciation is part of that training and part of that learning. We learn to let go. And then renunciation brings even more sense of well-being. That's the point of it. It's not meant to be deprivation.

And in this teaching that I'm kind of relying on for this talk, renunciation includes the practice of meditation. That's where it kind of fits in. There's a lot of letting go in meditation. There's a lot of letting go of thoughts, letting go of impulses, motivations, learning to sit quietly and peacefully, letting go of all the ways that we're harming ourselves. And one way of understanding meditation is a progressive lessening of self-harm. And it's hard for people to believe and know how much we're actually harming ourselves by the ordinary stressful ways that we're thinking and caught and fixated on thoughts and feelings and what we do in ordinary life. But we start seeing that, and relaxing, and softening, and part of the function of meditation is to soften, let go of all forms of self-harm. And that's the purpose of the *Four Noble Truths*. They usually use the word suffering there to address it, to talk about it.

So meditation then produces a sense of wholeness, deep peace, deep sense of well-being, And again, it becomes an even deeper reference point for wisdom. Now we know better and better and better what it means to avoid harm, what it means to not harm others, what it means to benefit self. Stay close to their inner welfare and happiness. What it means to benefit others. How to really benefit others in some good way. And it might be that, you know, you give someone cookies at work. And that might be nice. But it might be that how you give it might actually make all the difference in the world. And so there's some inner movement in how you give that is more than just, you know, throwing it on their table.

And so, it's based on this now that this path model I'm talking about moves into discussion of wisdom. Wisdom here is not something you learn first and foremost. The practical wisdom of the Dharma is gained through these first three steps. Many people in the West begin their path with meditation. And so that's where they learn this eventually. And then they feel, and from that they learn, oh, it's good to be generous. Or maybe first they learn it's good to be ethical. And then they learn it's good to be generous. So they kind of do it backwards sometimes in the West. Because we start with meditation.

I mean, how many of you would come to a course at IMC, Five-Way Introduction to Mindful Generosity? You might. Some of you might come. But, you know, our introduction here is five-week course in mindfulness meditation. And so these deeper reference points that we have. So that's what we're trying to look for in this practice. And how do we learn this reference point. How do we learn this kind of way of living? By living it. Action is needed. Action in body, action in speech, and action in mind. There is activity. This is an active path, the dharma. Even though meditation can look kind of passive, it's actually kind of active also. It's actively doing less. And this is a path of action of how you live your life.

And in living it, you then learn the feedback loops that you recognize and feel and know what causes harm and what brings benefit. And in doing that, then, you have the basis for wanting to care. Care comes out of that. Care is a deep place inside where we feel we have a concern, we have empathic concern, we have a sense of shared humanity, we have a sense of it's important. That humans, humans and their well-being, their inner life are invaluable. That everyone has the same kind of basic building blocks of an inner life that you do. Building blocks that, where there can be a completely natural instinct or impulse to care for the world. It's not an obligation.

One of the most beautiful little stories I like in Zen is someone asks the Zen master in China, what is it like to be the embodiment of compassion? There's a day they call the Kuan Yin, the embodiment of compassion. And the Zen master says, Oh, it's like rearranging the pillow when you're sleeping at night. I mean, it's like, what? The idea being that it's completely done unselfconsciously. Of course, if you're uncomfortable, something inside of you kind of rearranges the pillow to make yourself more comfortable to sleep better. There's almost no thought going into it. That's the source in which the embodiment of compassion cares for the world. There's no thought exactly. It's just kind of a course. If you have three pillows and the person sleeping near you has none and they're uncomfortable, here, take a pillow. Take two. You know, how do we share? This deep kind of caring instinct that we have.

And I was really touched when my mother was in the memory care home here in Redwood City to watch people who, in a conventional way of using the word love, didn't love my mother. But it was remarkable the care that they offered her. It was as if they loved her. And their professionalism, their calm, their dedication, their unwaveringness for the year and a half or two years she was there was phenomenal to watch and see the level of care they had. And this is possible for all of us. We can live in the world with care.

So, I'll read that quote again and then I'll make a statement to close. More theater. Wise people of great wisdom do not think of harming themselves, of harming others, or of harming

both. Rather, Wise people consider their own welfare, the welfare of others, the welfare of both, and the welfare of the whole world. In this way, one is a wise person of great wisdom.”

So, to conclude, because this is practical wisdom, this is wisdom that comes from how we live our life, It is up to you whether what you do for the rest of this morning, no matter how mundane it is that you do, it's up to you whether it's wise, wholesome, and well-born from this caring place within. It's really up to you. In all the things you do. And may you experience the wisdom that allows you to live with this kind of care, with this kind of self-care, with this kind of generative way of bringing well-being. And may it be an act of love. So, thank you. And we don't have time for questions.