

The Buddha as a Teacher of Action

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June 23, 2024

Keywords: kamma, mindfulness, wholesome, unwholesome, harm, benefit, body-speech-mind, reflection, ethical teachings, responsibility

So, for the talk, to hopefully say something succinct and memorable that you can carry through the talk, maybe through your life. In the time of the Buddha, he was characterized as a teacher of action. A teacher of action. And why would he be called that? And what did he mean by action, that he was known as a teacher of action? So that's kind of the part of the topic for today.

And in introducing this topic, I would say that the Buddha was much more interested in what we do than who we are. And in fact, if he was going to define who we are, the Buddha would define it by what we do. A farmer, someone who farms is a farmer. Someone who's a cook, someone who cooks is a cook. And so someone who meditates is a meditator. So it's what we do that the Buddha was interested in, how we got recognized and known.

And that goes a little bit against some of the popular orientations we have maybe in the West, the modern West, where I get a sense there's a lot of people who are looking for a message that somehow who they are is perfect. Somehow who they are is guilt-free. Someone who they are is okay. Something like that. And somehow inherently in who we are we're just fine the way we are. Somehow.

And I think that comes from a culture that has really conditioned people to think the opposite for themselves. There's a lot of self-criticism, a lot of anxiety about me, myself, and mine in this culture. There's a touching story that wasn't there, but I've been told of it many times by people who were there, that the Dalai Lama was doing some kind of teaching and someone asked him a question and he had a translator, and the translator would translate the question into Tibetan. And the person asked some question about how to work with, how to deal with self-hatred. And so the translator translated this for the Dalai Lama. And then he looked perplexed.

And so there was a long conversation between the Dalai Lama and the translator. People didn't know Tibetan, they didn't know what it was about. But at some point in that conversation, maybe the Dalai Lama understood the question. And he started to cry. It was inconceivable to the, somehow, maybe because of Tibetan culture, maybe because, I don't know who he is, the Dalai Lama, that there was a culture of people who have self-hatred. It was unbelievable to him. And when he realized that, he started to cry. Maybe we all can cry, what we have here in this culture.

And so, because of this, there's often, it's a relief to get a message that you're okay. That you're loved the way you are. You're fine the way you are. And so, but that's kind of how you are. And as a relief, as a correction, maybe that's a wonderful teaching. But the Buddha had a lot more. Buddha actually emphasized much more than how we are. What he emphasized, in fact, how we are was not that important for him.

And certainly he didn't want to, the Buddha was not oriented towards a philosophy or religious worldview or idea of ultimacy that there's some kind of core aspect of who we are that's perfect. The Buddha didn't have the notion of a soul, for example. There is no essential kind of heart. And that goes against the grain for a lot of cultures where they have that kind of view. So we have to kind of hold all this kind of lightly and maybe do a kind of cultural translation to really see how it all fits. But for the Buddha in his own terms, he emphasized action, what we do. And that this is where we could, you know, where we take responsibility.

And in teaching by action, he taught about action in body, in speech, and in mind. So there's a touching story, I think it's touching, of the Buddha teaching his son. So what most people don't know is the Buddha was a father. He had one child. And after the child was about six or seven years old, the Buddha was the primary parent. And we don't have a lot of stories about what he was like as a parent. But he was already a monk himself. And so he was living a religious life. And his son joined him in that kind of religious life following along.

And as maybe is not too uncommon, for children to stumble into this issue, that one day his son was apparently caught telling a lie. You know, maybe a seven-year-old, you know. And so I remember when I was maybe six or maybe seven or so, my father saw that we were playing checkers and he saw that I cheated. I guess I was losing, so I kind of put a couple of checker pieces under my hand and kind of slipped it on the board. And my father did a wonderful thing for me. I thought it affected me for the rest of my life in a certain way. He didn't criticize me. He wasn't angry with me or to me or something. He just got up and left. And that's all I needed to know.

I didn't need someone yelling at me or berating me or criticizing me. Just like, OK, if that's

what you do, this is what I do. Action. And so he didn't tell me, you're a terrible person. So his son was caught with a lie. And his son already was living a life of a novice monk, novice kind of novitiate. And which is not defined by what you are, but how you live your life. It's an action, a way of living.

And the Buddha said, if you tell a deliberate knowing lie, then your life as a novitiate has as much kind of spirituality, religiosity in it, as a bowl full of water that's been turned upside down. So all the water's gone out. So, you know, I don't know if it's not criticizing the son exactly, but this is the action and this is the consequence of the action in terms of how you're supposed to be living. And then he went on to say that anybody who is willing to tell a deliberate lie, there's nothing wicked they wouldn't do. Somehow there's something about telling lies that sets the stage for a lot of other things that cause problems.

And then he went on and said to his son, what's the purpose of a mirror? And the son said, oh, the purpose of a mirror is reflection. In the same way, you need to reflect. Your mirror is your actions. If you want to see yourself, study yourself through your actions. See yourself through what you're doing. So don't see yourself in some kind of essentialist way, like this is who I am. But learn who you are by what you do.

And this is how he said to do it. If you're going to do anything with your body, any physical activity, before you do it, reflect. Because you're looking at the mirror. Reflect. Is what I'm going to do, is it going to harm me? Is it going to harm others? Or is it going to harm both? That was the first criteria. Does it cause harm? Not just to myself. Equally important was others. And equally important was both, which I like to think of as the community we're in. All people.

And then he went on to say, you should also reflect, is this wholesome? Actually, he said it this way. You should reflect first, does it cause harm to self, others, or both? You should reflect, is it unwholesome leading to pain? Is it unwholesome leading to pain? If it causes harm, if it's unwholesome leading to pain, then stop doing it. Then he went on to say, while you're doing something with your body, you should be reflecting. Look at the mirror. Look yourself in the mirror of your actions and see for yourself, is it causing harm? Is it unwholesome, leading to pain? Because some things don't cause harm in the moment, but they cause harm in the future. So this thing has ongoing effects. And if you're doing it, and in the middle of doing it, you just stop doing it.

And then he said, after you've done something with your body, you should reflect. Have I caused harm? Was it unwholesome leading to pain? And if you see that it was, then you should go find a wise person and just talk about it with someone. So it doesn't say confess.

But there's something about when you've done something that's been harmful, unwholesome, there's something about the honesty, speaking about it honestly, getting it off, not necessarily off your chest, but getting it acknowledged. There's something about speaking that is a fuller acknowledgment and recognition of what you've done that helps the mind and the heart to disengage itself from it, from itself, not be so identified with it. And then it's a wise person who's now know what you're up to. So it's a little bit more difficult in the future to want to do the same thing. Because that wise person now is like, really? You're doing that again? You don't want your wise friend to have to say, really? You're doing that again? So it's a way of supporting us to be more careful in the future.

Before you do something and you reflect, if it is beneficial to oneself, beneficial to others, beneficial to both, if it's wholesome, leading to pleasure, leading to happiness, just keep doing it. Or do it. If it's during, then keep doing it. If you reflect after, then just rest content and happy, growing and cultivating wholesome states. So if it's wholesome what you're doing, and you'd finished doing it, and you recognize that it was a wholesome thing to do, then continue to develop wholesome states. So the wholesome states are developed by what we do.

So then he went through the same thing with speech. Same analysis. Then he did the same analysis. And it's wonderful. I think it's a speech because many of us find one of the most difficult places in our life to be mindful, let alone be wise and wholesome in how we speak, how we live, is through speech. And so here we're offered wonderful criteria and how to reflect on ourselves and be careful how we speak. And if we kind of spend time just pausing and looking and thinking about what we're going to say before we say it, with these criteria, we would live in a different world.

So, what I'm about to say, is this harmful for myself, harmful for others, or harmful to both? Is what I'm about to say, is it unwholesome, leading to pain? If it is, don't say it. I mean, what a great world we would live in if that was followed. I mean, the world would shine. But if what you're about to say is beneficial for yourself and for someone else and all people, then please say it. If it's wholesome and going to bring benefits and happiness, then please do it. So he goes through the same analysis. So speaking. So I recommend that.

And for me, I don't know how it is for you, this kind of this guideline that he gives his son, I'm actually more inspired by the speech part than by the action part. Maybe because I'm less likely to harm people with my actions than I am with my speech. Just subtle things we do. So subtle. And so having this little criteria I find very helpful.

And then the third one has to do with, for some of us, the speech we do in our head to our-

selves. We track what we're thinking. We track what's going on in the mind. And if what I'm about, the mental activity, the mental thinking I'm doing, if that is harmful to oneself, to others, or to both, then don't do it. And I think there it's particularly true that it affects us ourselves. I think we can harm ourselves tremendously at the self-talk we do. And how we harm other people, if it's all in the privacy of our own thoughts, is not so obvious. But I think it oozes out by osmosis. It oozes out by all kinds of subtle ways of communication to others. And they pick it up.

And so if we look at our own thoughts, and can we see, is this wholesome what I'm doing? Wholesome what I'm thinking? It doesn't lead to happiness or unhappiness. It doesn't lead to pain or pleasure. And so here again, we look at our own mind. So this is the three areas of action where the Buddha emphasizes to his son when the son was young. And we have three discourses where the Buddha was teaching, examples where the Buddha taught his son. And it's a marvelous three teachings, because one was when he was very young, one when he was a teenager, and one when he was just becoming an adult.

And for when the kid was small, he was teaching him this kind of an ethical teaching, we could say in English. When he was a teenager, he taught him not to be caught up in conceit. Some teenagers have. It's a little bit like that. But his teaching for how to deal with conceit was meditation. To develop a sense of well-being and happiness through meditation that the whole need for conceit begins to dissolve. And then when he was a young adult, the Buddha taught him the insights that pointed to the kind of way of seeing that is liberating. So you have these three phases of the young.

But the first one, which could be called ethical teachings, is really foundational teachings for all of Buddhism. It's not just a teaching to a young kid. All of Buddhism can fit underneath this criteria. Is it harmful or not harmful? Is it harmful or beneficial? Is it wholesome or unwholesome? Does it lead to pain or does it lead to benefit, to happiness? And the deepest meditators, people who are most skilled in meditation, going deep in states of meditation, the same criteria are the guide for how to go further and further in meditation all the way to liberation. Because we're getting more and more refined to see subtly the subtlest ways in which our mental activity causes stress, and causes freedom from stress, causes tension and freedom from tension. And just that very little criteria, seeing that, is what is onward leading, leads us. We become our own teachers and we find our way that way.

So this is not just a teaching to a young kid. This is a teaching for all of us. And there's no metaphysical teachings. There's no supernatural teachings. There's nothing you have to kind of believe in, in some kind of religious kind of belief kind of thing, except you have to

believe that it makes a difference how you act and what you do. That can't be that hard. That can't hurt that much to believe that.

So then, but so especially so it's one of the most difficult places for this is our inner life, our mental life. And for some people that's where we tend to identify strongly with our thoughts. Identify strongly with our feelings. We define ourselves by those. And our society sometimes helps us to do that. And an analogy I'd like to offer for this, sometimes like we're being caught in our thoughts. And we're so caught in the thoughts we think we are our thoughts. We think we have no choice but to think. Thinking is kind of like obvious, like this is true. Whatever I'm thinking, it's how it is because I'm living in my thoughts.

The analogy is if you're moving along a wheelbarrow full of heavy bricks. It's heavy to push it along. But then you're lucky. You come to a little place where it becomes an incline. So you can roll it downhill a little bit. In the beginning, it feels good. Oh, good. It's not to push so much. But the hill gets steeper and steeper and steeper. And at some point, the wheelbarrow is in charge. You're just desperately holding on and running after it, trying not to run into all the people on the hill. And you're completely invested and caught and you become the wheelbarrow almost because the wheelbarrow has the momentum. You're trying to hold on for dear life. So our thinking can be that way.

With a wheelbarrow, it's best just to put it down gently so it stops rolling. If it, or if you can't do that, it might be better off just to let go of it. Because a wheelbarrow is not going to keep rolling down the hill. It's going to tip over as soon as you're not holding it up. And all the bricks are going to fall out. So, with our thinking, we can be so identified with them, and sometimes the thinking gets a lot of negative self-talk, a lot of thoughts there about danger and anxiety and concern for this and that and trying to figure things out. And it's very hard to stop that identification, to stop believing in them, because we're living in them.

And so the Buddha, his emphasis was action. He was a teacher of action. So how does action come to play? Well, right now the action is one that's harming yourself. And so, you know, stopping it might not be so easy. But what can you do? And that's the magic question. What can you do? As soon as you ask yourself that question, what can I do that's different? You're already doing something different. Just a question creates a little space. Just a question creates a little pause. Just a question means that part of you is not so invested or caught or lost in the whole swirl of thoughts. So to have enough mindfulness to recognize, boy, am I caught. What can I do here? It's the beginning of what the Buddha wants us to be doing. What can I do? Does that question cause harm or benefit? It's not so clear yet. But it's certainly not causing harm to ask that question. But maybe it opens the door to figure out what to do is

beneficial.

And then, so what can you do? One of the things we can do is relax. Because whatever we're caught in thoughts, there's going to be tension in the body and in the mind. In the thinking muscle. And beginning to relax and soften. The thinking, the nature of thinking, is that if you're caught up in some big chain of swirl of thoughts, those thoughts are never going to, on their own, think that it's time to relax. They'll never come up with kind of like, maybe I shouldn't be doing this. They're very convincing. The authority of our thoughts are powerful. Partly because we give them a lot of authority. But as soon as you ask, what can I do that's different here? You're breaking the authority of those thoughts. You may be not breaking how strong they are. The wheelbarrow, you're still holding on to the wheelbarrow. But then begin to think, can I do something else with the wheelbarrow? Can I put it down so we can relax?

And so to become skilled, it takes skill. It takes familiarity. Really learn how to do this. Learn how to relax. And it means becoming highly attuned to micro-muscles around the temples, the forehead, the jaw, the shoulders. Where can you soften? Where can you relax something? That is the very thing that's feeding or keeping the thinking going. Obsessive thinking is reinforced by tension. If you want to stop that reinforcement, you have to look for, where can I relax and soften?

Some of you probably wake up in the middle of the night, anxious, caught up in thoughts. There's something else you can do, rather than just try to go back to sleep, try to go back to sleep. Relax. Start doing body scans. Just relax. Look at the micro-muscles around the thinking. Relax. Or I prefer the word release. Release the tension. Release. Because release to me is an opening. It's a kind of expanding. So this idea that you expand around something. You let go, you open, you relax, and expand. OK.

And so then, how are you doing that? How are you relaxing? Are you relaxed? That's the question. Always questioning, reflecting. How am I doing this? Well, am I relaxing in a way that harms me or benefits me? Boy, there I am again, harming myself. I'm there with a, you know, yelling at myself and prodding myself with sharp kind of mental knives. Relax. Come on, you can do it. You're not managing it. You're doing it the wrong way. Everyone else knows how to relax, but you don't know how to relax. So there you are, harming again. Or are you doing it in a way that's beneficial? What's the beneficial way to relax? So asking those questions, those are actions. Those are mental actions that can lead to benefit. How do I relax? Can I relax in a soft way, in an easy way? Can I relax without being so focused on being successful? I just do the best I can.

And so once we get the same thing with emotions. We're caught in emotions. What can relax? What can we soften? How can we open to this? How can we be with it? Rather than the wheelbarrow of emotions that we have. They're caught in. And so rather than having the world do, rather than being concerned about what the world does to you, be concerned of what you do in return. If you're concerned about what the world does to you too much, you might be forfeiting taking a deep look at yourself. And for the Buddha, it's always what your actions that he emphasizes. How you become free. How you don't become caught by the world. How you don't believe in the forces that come down upon you that tell you otherwise. You don't believe in the forces of oppression so that you oppress yourself or limit yourself. For the Buddha, it's always, what do you contribute? What do you do? How do you meet the situation? It's not what your emotions are doing to you that's important. What's important is what you do to the emotions. It's not important what your thinking does to you exactly. It's more important what you do in return, in response.

And Buddha being a teacher of action is, he's pointing to our role as actors in our own life. He's pointing to our own responsibility or our own ability to respond, our own capacity to find our own freedom. If we're looking for freedom to be handed to us from the world, it's never going to be handed to you. We have to find our freedom from within, the deepest kind of freedom, what might be called spiritual freedom. And so there's a program that I'm involved in at San Quentin State Prison. And one of the things they teach there, I think it was one of the men who was incarcerated who came up with this phrase, to become free while still in prison. And the context of that is quite, for me, it was quite powerful to think. To be even in that kind of situation, to find this freedom and not let the prison guards define who you are and what your inner life is like. To take responsibility. This is kind of the most radical message of the Buddha. And no one else is going to be the caretaker for your inner life but you.

Don't, what is it called in the business world now? Farm out? What's the other? There's another better expression. What? Outsource. Yeah, don't outsource the quality of your inner life. Don't expect that there's some person who's going to do it for you, or thing, or event. At least for the Buddha, you have to insource it. And it's your actions, your activity, what you do. And these criteria that are offered here, is it cause harm or not harm? The fact that that sits at the heart of Buddhism, it just makes me so happy. Given how much harm exists in this world. That really this is what's important. And then is it wholesome and beneficial? Wholesome and brings happiness. What a fantastic thing, if that could be the primary message for a religious life.

So that's started off. That's what I was thinking today. And so I walked out here from home. That was what I was, my physical action was to come there and tell you this. And then I spoke. And hopefully that's for my benefit and for all of yours. So thank you.

So we have a few minutes. If any of you would like to comment on this or would like to ask any questions, we can maybe take two or three. Sure. Thank you.

Hi, Gil. First of all, I've been sitting with a slight smile on my face and immense gratitude for your presence and talks. I discovered your talks on a podcast maybe 12, 13 years ago on the East Coast. And it's funny. I'm here with one of my best friends in California living here, a mom. And so much has changed in my life. I'm just very grateful for the presence, the perspective, and the peace that you have given to my life. And I just want to thank you, first of all. And my heart is racing from excitement, but I just want to ask you, today in the context of relationships and raising kids, thinking about the emotion, which is the feeling that comes outward, how do we communicate that in a, how do you say? wholesome way during the times when it may not be necessarily a wholesome message, while we also keep ourselves free of expressing ourselves and do not let it ooze through osmosis. So I guess that's a question.

Oozing out. So when my son was small, I thought I was doing a wise parenting thing. I wasn't going to express anger to my son. I was going to name how it was for me. And so I said to him, "If you continue doing what you're doing, I think I'll become angry." And he looked at me and said, "Dad, you're already angry." So he knew before I knew. So it oozes out.

And so I think one of the things to do is to practice mindfulness out loud. You have to figure out exactly how to do it appropriately with children. But have the children see that you can talk about how you're feeling without it being directed at anyone, attacking anyone. Just say, "That was a hard day today. I was really angry." And so I went for a walk to calm down. I went to meditate to calm down. And the kids see that there's a way that parents get angry just like they do. But the parent's not caught in it. And they have a way of practicing with it or some way of dealing with it.

And you might share examples like, "Today I was really angry or really afraid." And so I talked to my friend. And that helped me a lot. And so then the day might come when you're angry with them. And then you might say, "Oh, here I am. I'm angry." I've asked you many times not to walk across the kitchen floor with muddy shoes. And I just cleaned the floor. And so now I'm getting angry. But I don't want to be angry. I want to be able to talk to a friend about it. Can I talk to you? That's going to get their attention. And anyway, so you want to find ways of talking. And one of the simplest ways, I think, of being very careful is to try to make I

statements. I mean, there's so much I could say, but rather than you statements.

And then the other thing I learned being a young, when I was a parent of young kids, was the kids at a young age will learn from the parents how to be. And so there was a period of time where, a few times, very rare, but it was sometimes where one of my kids was kind of difficult for us. And sometimes I would use my strong voice. I thought to get his attention and have him stop what he was doing. But it was like, no, you have to stop with a strong voice. And then one day I heard him use the same voice to his younger brother. And I said, oh no, what have I done? So I learned I have to be really careful that what you pass on to the next. So I don't think I'm answering your question adequately, but maybe I offered little pieces that might. Is that OK for now?

So Gil, we have a question from YouTube, from Anne. She asks, what about when one takes too much responsibility for others' feelings? Well, I think that one of the things to do always is to turn the mirror on yourself, to learn how to look more deeply. And first, rather than analyzing or thinking about that you're taking too much responsibility, but if you recognize you are, I really look and feel what that's like to do that. What's the tension? What's the pressure? What's the heaviness? What's the compulsion? What does it feel like in the body physically? To start with, the body begins breaking up the hegemony of the thoughts, the ideas, the push of the responsibility. And when you start feeling it physically, it's also a way of beginning to create some distance from these really strong compulsive attitudes we might have, like including being responsible to other people. As we kind of begin to relax around it and soften, it gives the opportunity to look at it more deeply. What's going on?

And the next layer might be to notice what emotions come along when you're taking responsibility for others. Is it anxiety? Is it anger? Because you're trying to get everyone to shape up and be just like the way you think they should be. What emotionally is going on here? And then learn to understand them. And once you see the emotions, you're in a better place to take a deeper look at what are you believing? What's the belief behind it? What's the message you've learned about how to live a life? Did you grow up with parents who took responsibility for everybody? And then you've learned that's what you're supposed to do. And that's where the message came from. Or that's the belief. Or maybe the belief is that you're the all-knowing one. And everyone should just kind of behave properly because you know and that's why you're responsible. So I'm just making things up. So to do a deep inquiry in oneself and to do it in a way with that mirror of mindfulness, that the way that we do the inquiry, the way we study ourselves, are present for ourselves with mindfulness and asking ourselves good questions about what's happening, we do it in a way that is kind. We do it in

a way that's beneficial, that's wholesome. We don't do it punitively, we don't do it critically, but say, oh, this is how it is. Now let me take a deeper look. So that's, But I think I'm looking at you, because you answer. So thank you for the question online.

So thank you all very much. So I can be up here a little bit if someone wants to talk to me. But I have to also set up for the meeting we'll have here at 11.15. And you're all welcome to stay for it. And even if you're not, you're welcome. Even if you're just curious, what happens in a community meeting here at IMC? And if you want, in the meantime, there's maybe tea to be had by the tea area. And just hang out. And we'll ring a bell maybe about five, ten minutes before it starts. And there'll be a little bit of set up in here. We're going to set up a big monitor there. Because there's people on Zoom going to participate. And so we want to see them. And so you'll see a little set up differently in here. Thank you.