

Selfishness and Freedom from Selfishness

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So a couple of announcements before I begin the talk. First is that I'll have a Community meeting on Zoom tomorrow morning after the seven sitting and Dharma talks. It'll be at seven forty-five or so, and it's partly to commemorate the one-year anniversary of starting the seven sittings. And it's also, for many of us, the mark commemorates also the one-year anniversary of a sheltering in place where our life changed dramatically a year ago, and different places, of course, went into shelter at different times. But at least here in California a year ago. It's been a big year, and I almost was going to give a talk today about grief, and maybe I'll do that in a couple of weeks, but I wasn't quite ready for that.

And then next week I won't be here. Next week a wonderful teacher, Mana Johnson, is going to speak. She graduated a year and a half ago from that teacher training at Spirit Rock. So she's a local Dharma teacher, and very happy to have her come and spend Sunday morning with you. So imagine that you're in a beautiful place in nature, that maybe some place you've been and found inspiring, and be far away from buildings and roads and a lot of people. And it's just an expanse of a natural setting, beautiful, comfortable, safe, inspiring place to be.

And now maybe it's so inspiring. Maybe you visit regularly to appreciate and feel the freedom of just roaming around, and the trees, and the skies, and the hills, and the rivers, and lakes, whatever it might be. Just a vast space that's wonderful to be in. And so after visiting many times, you think, This is special, and you want to kind of mark the specialness of it some nice way and creative way. And so bring with you into the wilderness a glass door with a frame. Be a bit of an effort to bring it in there, and you install that door right in the middle of the wilderness.

This glass door swings open very nicely in its frame, and there it is, this door, middle of the wilderness. Some people might think it's an art installation, but it's your door, and it kind

of marks that this space, this place, is so special for you. It's kind of like marking it as being special, and that, you know, symbolically, it's a door into a different landscape and different place. And now, when you go visit in this big, vast, open space, there, in the middle, there's a door, and you put it right in the middle of a trail, so that when you go on the trail, you have to open the door and step through. And now, so the door is there, and you like this door. And sometimes it gets locked by mistake, and you have to go home and get the key to unlock it.

And sometimes it gets rusty, being in the weather, and you have to oil it so that it can open and close. And so, being a glass door, sometimes it gets dirty, and you have to clean it, and you care for this door, and after a while you think of this door as your door, and now you want to protect your door, because a door represents its openness into this wilderness and this freedom that's there, and you decide that the thing to do is to put a fence around the door to really protect it so the moose doesn't come along and knock it down and break the glass. So you put a fence around it, and you come out there, and you feel, My door is protected. And after a while, then you start feeling you look around it, Well, this enclosed, this place where I am close with a fence is not really big enough for me. It's, you know, I like, you know, I'd like more space to be able to come in and just kind of be spacious and open. And so you expand the fence, make it bigger and bigger.

And after a while you don't want to only see the fence. You make the fence really big, and it goes around the hills and outside of you, and so you go inside, you know, just you and the door, and the door's closed. Maybe sometimes branches fall on it and break it, and you fix it, and all kinds of things happen to that door. Eventually you wonder about the door, and then you remove the door, and then there's a vast open space again. Then you remove the fence, and it's just like it was before. It's still a beautiful location, inspiring and peaceful, wonderful to roam around in.

And then you think, What was I doing with the door? What was I doing with a fence? So this may be a little silly story. This is an introduction to the topic today, which is the Buddha's teachings on selfishness, the earliest teachings of the Buddha. As best we know, he did not teach anything about not-self, you know, famous teachings of the Buddha. It wasn't his focus, but rather he was focused on talking about the problems and suffering around being selfish, and how a wise person lets go of selfishness.

And as he developed his teaching, he described three different ways of being selfish or self-focused or self-preoccupied in some way. And one was through craving, one was through conceit, and the other is through our metaphysical opinions and views, beliefs that we hold on to. So the craving, an idea of selfishness, he associates with a possessiveness: possessing

things—These are mine, this is mine. The conceit is associated with a notion of I am, you know, that I am something, that I am this, I am that. It's a row of identities that we take on and hold on to. And the third is, This is my self, that this is the true self.

Now I know what the self is, and this is what the self is, what my true self is, my essence is. And in Pāli, these little expressions appear in the suttas. It's *etaṃ mama, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā*. And now it's kind of close to what we say in English of me, myself, and mine, as kind as it in reverse: This is mine, this I am, and this is my self. This is the self. So the reason to notice this and pay attention to it, it's the domain that the qualities of selfishness, of being caught up in excessive preoccupation with oneself, a strong attachment, clinging, a self-centeredness that can happen.

And this movement towards selfing and holding on to self limits our freedom. It does something which is not really necessary to cling to the self. That is comparable to this idea, if you will, if you allow me, of putting this door right in the middle of the wilderness. The wilderness was beautiful and wonderful by itself, and it was a wonderful place to visit, and peaceful and relaxing, and it was so much more or less complicated to be there. One, you didn't have to take care of the door, and protect the door, and repair the door, and build fences around the door. And the same thing, the natural kind of a natural state of being that can be quite open and peaceful and inspiring to experience for oneself, that it doesn't require placing something in the middle: This is mine. This is who I am. This is myself.

That movement is kind of an extra movement. That places something in the natural setting, which more often than not does not need it, especially if what we're doing is clinging and holding on to these things. So conventionally, we might say, Things are mine, and you know, it's a lot. We say it. It's, you know, things are mine. Things are legally mine. There's ownership. There's things which we allow each other to have.

But the selfishness around that is, when we cling to mine, we hold on to it for dear life, has to be this way, and this movement towards possessiveness and claiming things is mine, but this belongs to me is a recipe for suffering. The one famous myth of origin story in Buddhism that the beginning of one of the beginnings of the downturn of society was private property, and then people started hoarding in their private property and stealing, and things got out of hand in this mythic story. So the idea of it's mine and holding it tight, not realizing that possessions of all kinds—anything we can say is mine—is fragile, is temporary, is no guarantee that it's going to stay around. That I read recently about a meteorite or asteroid that kind of landed in the driveway of someone, and I think in Scotland, I think it was, or somewhere, and a rare mineral that came in this asteroid. And there's no, you know, no guarantee that

lightning's not going to strike us, or strike our things like our car or bicycle, and asteroid's not going to fall on something we own, and then we don't own it any more. It's gone, you know. It just becomes a squashed piece of burnt stuff.

And the idea that it is me, myself, and that it's mine has disappeared. Then, you know, I've recently I broke a ceramic bowl that my son had made, and a beautiful bowl, and I broke it in the kitchen, and it was ours, belonged to our family. But soon as it was broken, I didn't really think of it any more as mine, or I don't think of it as belonging to my family. I rather unceremoniously just kind of put it in the trash, and off it went. And then, so mine, as I loved a story that Suzuki Roshi told—I've told it many times—of Suzuki Roshi, there's a photograph of him actually saying this, that taken just as he was saying it. So it's kind of more poignant. He was the photograph of him holding up his glasses like this, and he says, These are not my glasses, but you know about my old tired eyes, so you let me use them. That's a very different relationship to my glasses.

And so certainly it's convenient to have things that we use, and know they are there, and are reliably going to be there next day when we find them. And so we say they're mine. But you might reflect a little bit about how much extra attachment there might be: possessiveness, fear of safety, fear of not being safe, of an attachment to status, attachment to all kinds of things that come. We say something is mine. It gets more kind of interesting when you look at that. We take as mine traits of our personality, or qualities of our physique and our body and ways we are in the world, opinions, my opinions, and if we hold on to those and cling to those and think they're unchanging, we'll suffer.

So the suffering of taking things as mine and for the Buddha is very explicit. Even taking this body as mine is a recipe for more suffering. And so, you know, isn't it natural and normal to take this body as mine? I think it's natural, normal, conventionally to take it as mine, my body. But to do so with an open hand, not clinging to it, just lightly, provisionally. But as soon as I say my body, then I have to be in charge of it, and I can't change, and it has to always stay the same.

Maybe the second form of selfishness is conceit. And this is the idea of over-evaluating oneself. It has to do with how we value ourselves in relation to other people. And the common way in English a word conceit refers to thinking that we're somehow have a higher value than others. We are better than others in some ways. And so it's a form of comparative thinking.

And as soon as we get involved in comparative thinking of other people, this is really an amazing source of suffering. Comparative thinking, you know, things are constantly shifting in the social world, and between us and our abilities and other people's abilities. And so, you know,

if we expect to always have a higher valuation, other people, we'll meet someone else who can be better. You know, I'm pretty good at basketball for someone, you know, compared to the six-year-old next door, but not compared to most adult men at this point. And so do I hold on to that, to have a conceit around I'm a good basketball player, I'm better than everyone else, you know? I probably just suffer around that kind of idea.

And so this comparative thinking is an unnecessary glass door in the wilderness, in the natural setting. It mars the situation, it limits it, it becomes something then that we mean to protect, we'll put fences around it. We need more and more fences and control for it, and it actually is a form of limiting ourselves rather than freeing ourselves. There's a wonderful cartoon from Calvin and Hobbes where Calvin is in the snow building a fort and can make himself safe in this fort, and he is building up the walls, so it just goes above his head, and he is making it really tight and compact, and surrounds himself with all this snow to make a good safe fort for himself. But it's a vessel, made a round little cone around himself, and once it's all finished, he's trapped inside, and he says, Help, help, because he can't get out any more. So this idea of conceit is a kind of become a trap. We kind of protect it too much, and we kind of can't breathe even—me, myself, and mine. A conceit of being better than.

And in the ancient Buddhist language, a Buddhist teaching, a word which was closely related to *māna*—*māna*, the word for conceit—is the word *mada*, and *mada* means to be intoxicated, totally confused and wrapped up in things. And sometimes it's translated as pride. But the English word pride maybe has a variety of different meanings these days. Sometimes they're positive. But since the original meaning of intoxication, this word *mada* is pride, is intoxication. One translation of ancient Abhidhamma text is to list all kinds of things. People are intoxicated by their birth, by their caste, basically intoxicated by their clan, intoxicated by their health, by youth, intoxicated with life itself, intoxicated with gain and acquisitions, intoxicated with honor, with being respected, with fame, with having followers, with wealth, with skin color, with learning, with intelligence, with not being despised, accomplishments, popularity, with being ethical, with meditation attainments, and the list goes on and on.

But each of these is seen as a kind of pride, a kind of conceit, and a conceit that we get intoxicated by, caught by. And it's so much easier to be in life, in the world, without getting caught by these comparative thinking with others. One form of comparative thinking that, in the Buddhist idea of conceit, is also the idea of thinking that we are less than other people, that we have less value than others in some way. And that's also conceit, because it's also an attachment to an idea of self, attachment to a comparative way of thinking. And the solution is not to figure out a better way to compare, and even the idea of comparing ourselves as

equals to others in Buddhism is considered to be partly still playing the comparison game, but rather freedom is found by not comparing, by allowing ourselves and others to be just as they are and much more. And so removing the door and the fences in the middle of the wilderness, and letting that natural setting be itself.

The third kind of conceit is the conceit of views, of philosophical opinions, beliefs about what is the true self, the essential self. And the Buddha said there's, he knew of his time, no belief in an essential self, a true self that doesn't bring suffering. And I don't, haven't done the analysis myself to see if that's really the case. But it's certainly a provocative idea, then, and certainly we can say that any time we crave or cling to something, we will suffer. And so we're clinging and craving, craving, clinging, or craving to a view, an idea: My true self is my soul. My true self is my, is my, you know, inner goodness. My true self is my, is my, you know, whatever it might be, my consciousness? It is not going to give birth to suffering. Does it bring suffering? When we're not in touch with that true self, when it's not evident and present, does it just remain an idea that we have?

And so the idea needs to be reinforced, needs to be reasserted or kept in touch with it, because maybe it can't really be felt and experienced. Or what about deep meditation? When whatever we feel or experience as the essence of who we are falls away, then some people get really frightened by this, because the deep peace of meditation where things just let go, we let go of all clinging, it's remarkable how wonderful that peace is, how remarkable how liberating it can be, and how the ordinary reference points for anything we have, we experience as myself, dissolve. And then, if, but some people get really frightened, because that's who they think they are: I am this, and I have to be this. So selfishness, and the antidote to selfishness, in Buddhism is certainly to see the suffering of it. And sometimes it's only by seeing how painful it is and how fragile it is and how much energy goes into being selfish that people are beginning to loosen up and let go.

But the other antidote is happiness. It's to experience a deep abiding sense of happiness, well-being, contentment that doesn't require being selfish. And so too, that's one of the functions of meditation practice is not only to become calm, not only be mindful, but to acquire a sense of deeper contentment, satisfaction, ease, to be able to breathe easily, freely, without any clinging to selfishness, any kind of idea of me, myself, and mine at least. To give ourselves a radical break from it. So we don't come into meditation and hold on to these ideas of me, myself, and mine all often. The source, the fuel for a lot of our preoccupied thinking is me, myself, and mine. And to let go of that, so we can experience something really wonderful.

And to value this wonderful, beautiful, natural setting that we have—the natural capacity for

ease and freedom and peace—and to learn how to wander freely, openly, in our own hearts and our own minds and our own life, without the glass door in the middle of it all, without the fences all around it, so it's unobstructed by it all, where we don't need to advertise ourselves or promote ourselves or to explain to people who we are, and assert ourselves on people as a form of clinging and a sense of well-being. And one of the benefits of discovering such a kind of well-being and peace and ease and letting go of all this is that then it also might be easier to stand up for oneself when society around you defines you, when society around you says you can't be that how you are. You have to be different or you are in this kind of way. If we don't get, if we have our own stability inside and peace inside that we know and we're not wrapped up around identity issues, then in the way that this clinging involves clinging, then it can be quite powerful to stand up for ourselves and say No to people, not go along with what people are, how people are defining us, how other people's me, myself, and mine, you, yourself, and yours. It is really oppressive for many people. And so really looking deeply at selfishness and how it works with me, myself, and mine is also a gift, so that we don't project you, yourself, and yours on to others in ways that make them oppressed.

Imagine if we can live in a world where we don't put any fences around anyone, we don't put any glass doors that block anyone's path, where we allow the people to be how they are. We allow the natural world to unfold in a beautiful way without the limitations and the problems of our clinging, especially the clinging to selfishness. May it be that this meditation practice shows us the limitations, shows us the suffering of our selfishness, so that we become more open, more free, more generous, more kind, more forgiving, and more in a certain kind of way, natural. The kind of naturalness is there when there is no clinging. So I hope that gives you something to think about and now to reflect on, and hopefully you're forgiving of yourself if you happen to have some conceit, or some me, myself, and mine. But you might want to take a deeper look at this topic and make it a study for the week.

And this is this list that I read from the ancient texts about intoxicated. When I saw this list, I was kind of delighted that day. Being intoxicated, preoccupied, caught up in things like health and youth and gain and honor, being respected, fame, having followers, our learning, accomplishments, popularity—all kinds of things. It's been going on for thousands of years. This is kind of what humans tend to do, especially when they come together. So if you have, you're involved in some of it as well. You have a lot of company, and you have the company of the Buddha of freedom. You have the company of yourself, perhaps in meditation, where you are beginning to loosen up and unstretch yourself from all forms of selfishness. May you be. May you let go of selfishness and find out how to be really happy in this life. Thank you.