

Caring for Self and Others

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So good day, everyone. And as an announcement before the talk, you know, we're getting to the point where I'm really considering opening our doors—here, our physical doors—so people can come here together and meditate and engage in the Dharma. We were planning to open a week from today, on August first. So I think it's prudent for us to delay that opening and continue online the way we have with the Dharma. Part of the reason for that is that this delta variant is spreading, and we don't quite understand the implications of it and the impact it has, the degree to which even people who may have been vaccinated can be symptomatic carriers of it, and what it means for us to come together here in somewhat close confines. As it's still kind of growing, and the cases are growing here in our county in California, I think that the prudent thing to do is to wait.

Ideally, we would wait, I think, until the local county health department makes the request that people—even vaccinated people—when they come together indoors, should wear masks. I don't know if that's the standard you want to keep, at least for now. That's the request. And with the delta variant, I think it's just better to wait. I think we'll just keep it open, or undefined when we'll open, and probably we'll have at least a week's notice that we can announce it here. Our other online offerings will also be updated on the calendar and on the website about what's happening.

Hopefully, to keep track of these things, you'll know—those of you who are interested in coming locally and being here in person. So, you know, we've gone through—many of us, all of us, I guess—many, many months now of this pandemic of the nineteen era. When we first started here, and we went into shelter in place in California back in March or April, I gave a talk about this being a time for kind of a sheltering place, which was kind of like a retreat. Many of the dynamics and the patterns that happen on retreat would probably unfold for people on this

enforced retreat of the shelter in place. Now we're coming to a different phase of it. It is not clear exactly what phase.

It's premature to say that we're completely open again and it's over—here in California at least, and in parts of the country, and in different parts of the world, it's raging and surging, and, you know, tremendous suffering is continuing with this virus. To have some reflection: what are the lessons from this? How do we grow and develop under the impact of this powerful event that's happening to us all? So that's what inspires this talk today. I wonder, before I specify what the theme is, I want to say that one of the first things that really impressed me about the circumstances at the beginning of the pandemic, beginning of shelter in place, is that the same behavior, from outside, can look exactly the same. It could be behavior which the main motivation is for individuals to protect themselves, and the same behavior would be to behave in such a way as to protect others.

What I mean by that is that we're all, you know, subject to maybe getting sick from the virus, and so we might want to stay away from people who have the virus. We want to shelter in place. We might want to live apart. That's what many of us have done now for many months—somewhat isolated existences for this time. So it can be motivated by protecting oneself. However, all of us are capable of being a vector for it, a transmitter of the illness.

We know that people can have the virus and be asymptomatic. They have no idea that they're carrying it, and they're just walking transmitters. So one way to protect people—our neighbors, our friends, our family, and others—is to not walk into public, not walk into their situation, not go to a wedding, not go to visit children, or visit grandparents, or not to go into places where we might be a transmitter. Both behaviors look exactly the same. What struck me at the beginning of the pandemic is that if we were motivated by care for others rather than only protecting ourselves, I think that caring for others is really good for the heart. It's really a wonderful kind of medicine and support.

There's a kind of radiance or goodness that comes from that. Of course, protecting ourselves is not wrong, and some people have a higher need to do that than others, and for many different reasons, that needs to be the focus. But even there, it's possible to both protect oneself and at the same time do it for the sake of protecting others. So this idea of being able to do both—we don't have to choose one or the other. The theme of what I like to say here is that the Buddhist practice is a practice that—I'm hoping, I very much staked my career in practice, in teaching on this—that as we develop in the practice, it becomes a natural thing to want to care for others, or to be friendly, or be supportive, or live in the world in a compassionate way, in a world of suffering.

Not to do it in a way that is oppressive, not to do it in a way that is stressful, but really from the abundance of the heart, from a sense of the peacefulness, the openness, the heightened kind of a three hundred sixty degree radiance of awareness, and the heart of compassion that meets the world with our sensitivity and responds to it in some way. This is an integral part of Buddhist practice. It is a growing to become someone who will, in one way or the other—particular for each person, how it's done—live for the welfare and happiness of others. For some people, it's caring for their family. For some people, it's caring for family and neighbors. For some people, it's offering whatever they have to offer that brings joy and happiness to the world.

Some people, it's to be actively involved in service roles where we're helping others and involve others. Some people are activists and involved in social action. Some people, humanitarian efforts—there's this whole range of things that people will choose. A lot depends on their karma, their disposition, and their circumstance—what's the right way. But it's all ways of somehow having a heart that cares for the world. So when the Buddha, after the Buddha was first awakened, soon thereafter he set forth out into the world to teach what he had learned.

After some period, he had gathered around him sixty people—six zero—who had been transformed by his teachings and the practice he taught, and they became fully enlightened, fully liberated. At that point, he told them—and this is a quote, this is a passage quoted often, it's kind of beautiful—he instructed them. He gave them the final instruction. It's kind of like, after all the instructions and all the practice, they all end up here as a final instruction, and that is to go forth for the welfare of the world, welfare of the beings, the people of the world. Go forth for the happiness of this world of beings. Go forth out of care for this world of beings and people.

No two, few of you, go in the same direction. Spread out and live for the—and practice and teach for—the welfare and happiness of all people and all gods. The word gods here, it's possible, sometimes the word *deva* means kings. So go forth for the welfare of all beings, all humans, ordinary humans, and those who are in ruling positions, who sometimes need greater remedial support for learning how to be free, and really understand what freedom from suffering really is. I love this little passage that the instructions are to go forth for the welfare and happiness of the world. That's kind of like the North Star of what Buddha's practice is aiming towards.

This is the final instruction. Then if we go to a whole different set of teachings, which also emphasizes this care for others and care for oneself, this is the Buddha's teachings to his

son. He had a son who spent much of his growing up under the guidance of his father—from, they think, about the age seven onwards—and at some point, the Buddha gave him these instructions that could be seen, some people say, as a child-appropriate kind of teaching. But because it's so simple and so to the heart of the matter, it may be easier to understand. All the rest of Buddhism can be seen as an expansion of this particular teaching. It seems, the way the stories go, he told his young son—maybe seven or eight, nine years old—who was caught telling a lie.

The Buddha addresses him about this and says, you know, that if someone on the spiritual path tells a lie, it kind of undermines the value of their practice, and really empties the cunning reservoirs of goodness or Dharma inside of a person that really would allow a person to grow and develop. So he uses kind of a little bit strong language like this, like that. It's not really that someone who is on the path should never lie. After he does that, he says this: he says, what's the purpose of a mirror? His son says, oh, the purpose of a mirror is for reflection, to see yourself in the mirror. Now the Buddha said, in the same way, the Dharma is like a mirror.

The purpose is to see yourself and to reflect yourself more clearly. This is how you do it. Before you say something, before you do something, and before you intentionally think about something, you should reflect. You should look at that, take a good look at yourself with these criteria: is what I'm about to say—will it cause affliction, will it cause harm to yourself, to others, or to both self and others? If you say it, if you do it, or even if you think it, will it cause harm? If it does, don't do it.

If it doesn't cause harm, if it's for the benefit of others, then please go ahead and do it. While you're doing something or saying something, or even while you're reflecting and thinking about something, also use that Dharma mirror. Look at yourself and ask yourself the question: as I'm doing this, is it for my own harm, for the harm of others, or for the harm of both self and others? If it's harmful, stop doing it. If it's not harmful, it's for the benefit of others and self, then keep doing it. Then he says, after you've done something, after you've said something, after you've finished some action that you've done, after you've spent some time thinking about someone or something, you should also use a Dharma mirror to be relives—a reflective life, questioning yourself, looking at yourself, considering the impact, the consequences of your behavior.

Did it cause harm to yourself? Did it cause harm to others? Did it cause harm to self and others? If it did, then go find someone you respect a lot—the ancient language is a wise person. Find a wise person and let them know. There's the alchemy, the chemistry of the inner life is

such that if you've caused harm—and usually, like, not exactly a confession, but just going to make it acknowledged in the presence of someone else—it changes some inner relationship to it all.

It's easier for you to kind of not succumb to the same thing again. It is more likely if you're accountable in some healthy way, and you're not—you're a little not public to everyone, but you share it with someone else—then you're a little bit more accountable to that person, to yourself. It'll be more like a fuller recognition that creates the conditions that you're more likely to be careful in the future. So the Buddha said, go tell someone. But if it's after you've done something, and it has not been harmful to anyone—for self or others—has been beneficial, then just go about your business happily. That's great.

So what we find here at the teaching his son when his son was just a kid is kind of like the most beginning level of Dharma practice, of Dharma teaching, that here also we find a concern, emphasis in the concern of being careful, the welfare of others, do not cause harm in the world to anyone, including oneself. It wasn't only about not harming oneself, only doing things beneficial for oneself. It's equal concern for self, for others. Then this third category, self and others, which I understand includes kind of we as a community, we as a group, as a dynamic of people who work together, the relationship between us. So we see here in these two examples how integral it is to the teachings of the Buddha: the concern for the welfare of others and well-being of others, and the concern with not causing harm to others or to ourselves. All along, from between the beginning instructions to the final instructions that go forth for the welfare of others, we see over and over again that we come back to this idea that the Dharma has a lot of practice maturing in.

The Dharma has a lot to do with how we care for others as well, and with the example that is what I was inspired by at the beginning of the pandemic. Perhaps also we begin discovering a way of having this care and sensitivity and carefulness for the welfare of others and not cause harm that doesn't feel punitive, that doesn't feel constricting and doesn't feel limiting, but actually is the opposite of that. As we go forward and consider others, we're doing so from this openness, this, you know, inclusiveness, this unconstricted place, unlimited place, when our concerns are not narrowed and tight, but our concerns come out of an openness and a wideness and receptivity all the way around. There is a way in which, when we are excessively concerned with ourselves, our own condition, our own well-being, our own protecting ourselves or benefiting ourselves, as I said earlier, sometimes that's completely appropriate and necessary and should be appreciated as such. But human beings also have a tremendous capacity for being selfish, for having conceit. When that happens, then this self-concern feels

like a narrowing, a tightening, a shutting down.

This is one of the great advantages of meditation: we can have an experiential, a felt sense experience of what it feels like to be a sort of closing down, constricting, tightening—the tension and the stress of selfishness, the tension and stress of conceit, of excessive self-preoccupation. In a felt sense experience, when we open up, there is a way of caring for the world that is absence of stress, absence of contention, that feels like it has a kind of a rightness to it, a nourishing to it, a freedom to it, even if what we're encountering in the world is suffering, if the world is quite uncomfortable. This is kind of the goodness of this, the support of that. So I think that inherent in the Dharma practice is a learning, perhaps a slow learning, of the disadvantages of shutting down, closing down, or having this very strong division, divisiveness, boundaries between self and others that is actually harmful to oneself. It leads to easy ways of harming others, and those begin to dissolve, begin to soften, to open. It isn't that the boundaries completely dissolve exactly between self and other—that distinction doesn't completely disappear—but it becomes one that is there's a sensitivity and openness and intimacy without this strong reference to me, myself, and I here, an openness, relaxation, freedom.

Then I have one more teaching of the Buddha around this—such, I think, a very important topic to think carefully about—and that is that the Buddha gave the teachings about four different ways in which people might orient themselves towards others or to benefiting others. The first one is to have no interest in the welfare of either oneself or others. The second is to be interested in the welfare and happiness of others but not oneself. The third is to be concerned for the welfare and happiness of oneself but not be involved in benefiting others. The fourth is to be concerned for the welfare and happiness of oneself, of others, and of the whole world. Then he goes on to say that the last of these is the foremost, is the best.

He says it's kind of like if you take milk and it gets curdled into curds, and then from the curds you can make ghee, and from ghee apparently you can get the cream of the ghee, like the best parts of the ghee, if you separate it maybe or something. A less translation that I have says that then finally you get to the cream of the ghee. In the last category, the person's concerned for both self and the whole world—that's kind of the equivalent of the cream of the ghee kind of person, the foremost person. What's interesting is that there's a hierarchy here between these. Caring only for others, or caring only for ourself, fits into these categories. It's fascinating, I think, because the second best is to care for oneself without caring for others. Third best is caring for others but not oneself. This, I think, is a little bit jarring. It was a little bit jarring for me when I first saw it. For some people it's jarring because sometimes here's a

message: we should really care about others first before ourselves.

We shouldn't be selfish. Caring for others is really the highest kind of virtue we can have. But I think in the Buddhist analysis, if we care for others before we have developed ourselves, developed our own capacity and understanding of liberation, of freedom, before we've freed ourselves of some of our capacity for attachments, for clinging, for hostility and irritation and cynicism and resentment and that, then it's all too easy to cause harm when we are involved in supporting other people. But if we practice for our own benefit first, then we learn at some point what the highest benefit is. We learn what the human capacity is for real deep, thoroughgoing, fully embodied, heartfelt well-being and peace and happiness. That's what the Dharma is moving towards. Then when we want to support and help others, we have a reference point of how deeply and fully this is possible for people, that we can point to that, or we can support that, or we have a north star of what we're trying to do for them. So the best of it all is if we live our lives caring for ourselves, caring for others, and caring for the whole world. Here we see three different examples of the Buddhist teachings where caring for the world is integral to it. The last one I told first about sending people off—fully mature people—to care for the world.

The idea is that when you are fully liberated, you've experienced for yourself the best possible way of living in this world, the greatest happiness, the greatest peace. So there's no need to kind of focus on oneself in the same way anymore to attain that—what's been attained. Then what's next is to care for others. So whether one is beginning in practice, or in the middle of practice, or at the end of the whole cycle of practice, in the Buddha's teachings at least, this inclusion of the well-being of others is important. In the first beginning teachings to his son, a tremendous care about the consequences of our actions. What's the impact that our lives, how we live, has on the world around us, and one of the things the coronavirus teaches us is that that impact might be invisible to us.

How we buy consumer goods, you know? We don't see the impact on the people who mine the resources. We don't see the impact on the countries and the peoples from whose—made it, in fact, or sweat houses or in factories. We don't see the impact and pollution in an environment, in communities that are impacted by that. So to be concerned about the impact, the consequence of our actions on others can also start to involve a care and sensitivity to the unseen ways that we impact the world, because it would be nice if we could live in the world without any harm caused to this world, both seen and unseen, known and unknown. What a great thing it would be, and what a great thing it is to meet people and know there are people in this world who are living with this kind of care and this consciousness because

they're free, because they mature and developed, and they know how to do this in a way that nourishes the best in our hearts.

So as we come to the end, we've come to this phase of the pandemic. I think it's a wonderful time to reflect a little bit about how beneficial it is for self and for others to include in our practice the welfare and happiness of others as well. Thank you very much.