

Born through the five reflections

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So it's possible that there's no Buddhist word for the English word sacred. And so some of you might not prefer to hear the word sacred in this context here. But probably if there was such a word that qualifies, in English it's the word the Buddhists use called noble. There's the noble Eightfold Path, for example. And there's those people who are the noble ones. And the noble ones are those people for whom the Eightfold Path, in which whom the Eightfold Path has been born and grown.

And they become the Eightfold Path. So that's why the path is noble, and what the path does to us is ennobling or sacred. It sacralizes in some place. It's very important. And so this idea of the path is very important in Buddhism. And there are teachings, ancient teachings, that the path is not outside of you, the Buddhist path.

You can't come to IMC and just look under the carpet or under the stage here or the chair. And where is that Eightfold Path? Where is the Path of Practice? You won't find it here, unfortunately. And you won't find any temple, any Buddhist place. The path is only found in yourself.

It's an engagement. It's a way of living a life that you have a potential for, and you enact. So there's a path of practice. And that path of practice is sometimes described as being born in us. It's something that's going to be born. And implying that it's going to be born implies it's then going to grow.

It's going to develop over time, not as something external, but kind of a natural inner development, inner maturation that goes on. And so we're recognizing a potential that we can give birth to, that we can awaken, we can begin to develop. And it's kind of powerful, I think, that the synonym or the metaphor for that is to give birth to it. It makes it also very personal. If we extend this metaphor of birth, if a human birth, generally, mostly, it doesn't happen

immaculately, immaculate conception, it requires conditions to come together for birth to happen. And one of the primary conditions is there has to be coming together of an egg and a sperm.

They have to meet. And so the same thing for the path to be born in us, it requires certain conditions that come together. And there are, I would say, two primary... Sorry. Oh, that volume, Matta. Usually that's really loud.

I wonder if... Does anybody know how to... Is it... It's off? It's on now. So it's loud enough now? Yes. So it's unusual to have that one be, need to be louder, but maybe you're way in the back there. So is that to get it louder now? So yeah, there's a knob there, isn't there? There's also, for those of you who ever sit out there, there is a volume knob out there that's hidden. So let's see if we can, because it's a little bit louder in here now. So if we can, so go down there, go down there now? Yeah, we usually don't have people sitting so far away, so this is good to take into account. We'll work on it.

And so for this path to be born inside of us, two conditions need to come into play and to meet. And the first is something that's a very general term that encompasses a huge part of what it means to be human, and that is awareness. Awareness. And the second is to be aware of something in particular. So these are the two things that have to meet for the path to be born. So we start with this topic of awareness.

This is, you know, homo sapiens. We're kind of those who know. And this is a hugely important capacity of human beings that is generally undervalued. It's also a multifaceted capacity. We have many faculties for attention, many faculties, many capacities, many different ways in which we take in information from within us and the world around us and register it and process it and adapt and change accordingly so we can find our way through this life of ours. And many of those capacities for attention, for sensing, knowing, happens subconsciously, happens, it doesn't happen deliberately, it doesn't like we plan to do it.

It just goes along with being a human being that these things operate. But it's kind of an amazing thing. Maybe just like the word sacred maybe is not exactly a Buddhist word, so the word miracle maybe is not exactly a Buddhist word. But it's kind of close to a miracle that all the different capacities we have. I'm fond of doing this imaginary trip of going back to beginning of this planet when there was just maybe a soup with amino acids. That weren't really considered life yet, but the kind of the carbon ingredients that's going to make life.

And, you know, it took a long time for these amino acids to find each other and they're just the right way and make more complicated molecules and more complicated molecules. And

then somehow they figured out, figured out somehow they came about replicating each other. And then eventually there became something that began looking at life, this replication and then the ability to then respond to the environment to some way. And slowly these very primitive forms of life started to become more complicated and more complicated. And they started forming cells, and cells started becoming specialized to be able to sense the environment around and respond to it accordingly. And at some point, these little life forms started to be able to be mobile and maybe... push themselves through the water and make their way on the land.

And as they did, they were constantly adjusting and evolving to fit into the environmental niche. And to adapt, those that could fit, you know, the environmental niches would survive and do better. And they got more and more complicated. And I don't know if, I wouldn't say that humans are the pinnacle of that process of complication, but we are amazingly complex. And we inherited... all this previous species, previous life, all the adaptations that they made so that we could then adapt more and have all the different sensory capacities, knowing capacities that we have. So that we can be adaptable to our world, so that we can respond appropriately to our world, so we could survive.

Well and creatively to this life that we've been born into. And so when we say being mindful, when we're cultivating present moment awareness, we are tapping into the full array of our attentional faculties. So certainly we have, you know, to give you some semblance of how rich that world is, just of sensing... We have eyes that sense visual objects. And that's a complicated phenomenon. And the fact that we can see certain colors, certain wavelengths, and not others, and all kinds of things I've gone into seeing.

There is hearing. There is smelling and tasting. There's tactile touch. And that's just the beginning of it. There is proprioception, where we kind of know our balance, know where we are in space, the sense of balance. There's the... We have all kinds of receptors, sensory nerve receptors, that pick up a lot of different pieces of information.

There's those that pick up temperature. And so we know when we're warm and we're cold, and that becomes very important. There are senses that pick up pain and pleasure. And I've heard of people who don't have pain receptors, and it's hard to survive without those. Apparently they injure themselves quite a bit and sometimes die early lives because they don't have that feedback system of knowing what to avoid. And then there is this chemical... receptors, chemo sensors, receptors they say, that have to do with hunger and thirst that are operating.

And if those go wacky, then we're kind of can be in trouble. And there is probably all, I mean,

lots of different kind of ways in which we sense. We sense and feel the inner life. We sense when we're nauseous. There's a whole sensory apparatus for nausea that goes on. And so... You know, there's this array of sensory capacities we have.

The sensory capacities provide information to the body so the body itself can adjust. There are senses for that measure how much carbon dioxide and oxygen there is in the lungs or in the blood or something. And so that's also adjusting. So we breathe more strongly if we need to or we breathe less. And a remarkable thing about very deep meditation is how little we need to breathe. Maybe because we're not using a lot of oxygen.

It's been said that the biggest energy use in the human body, I guess, use of oxygen is the brain. So if in meditation the brain gets really, really calm and still... It doesn't need as much, so therefore there's more oxygen in the blood that doesn't get used. It's circulating. And so the whole breathing system slows down because it knows you don't need to breathe so much. And it happened to me and no, it happened to other people who had happened, you know, unbeknownst to them, they were slowing down, slowing down, and were quite calm and peaceful.

And I remember being so content and happy and peaceful until... I realized I wasn't breathing. And then I gasped. And my mind said, I'm going to die. So it took a while to learn that in this deep meditation that you're not going to die if you don't literally feel like you're breathing. So we have all these receptors, all these sense apparatus.

And they're kind of all working in the present moment. So part of the richness of really being aware in the present is that we avail ourselves of a whole richer range of all the sensory input we're going on. To practice mindfulness in it being an embodiment where we really feel like we're grounded in our body, then we're putting ourselves in the mode of receiving so much of the physical information the body's providing all the time. But if we're too busy to notice our body, we don't really, some of it we don't really receive consciously enough to make conscious adjustments to it. I've been tense with my shoulders maybe approaching my ears. And I didn't know it because I was so concerned about what I was tense about.

Remember one time I really wanted something so badly. And then there was a pause in the whole situation. And so I checked into my body. Only then did I realize how tense my shoulders were. And then I could feel my shoulders. Poor shoulders, they wanted to relax.

So I just let them. And so to not know what's happening in the body limits dramatically the information we get about what pleasure, pain, even comfort and discomfort are very important signals. Everything's a signal. And how to take these signals in and use them in a healthy,

appropriate ways is part of the task of humans. But in Buddhism, awareness or mindfulness is not just sensory information. It's not just feeling the sensations of the body, which is kind of half of what mindfulness is.

The other half of it is knowing, is our cognitive capacity to recognize what's happening. And there are people who prefer the sensing and not the cognizing, people who prefer cognizing and not the sensing. The idea is these work together in harmony, and they both need to develop for this path. But knowing is also a vast kind of faculty. It's many faculties of knowing that come together. And so to know something sometimes requires memory.

Right? We have to have learned something before to know something. If you leave here today, and those of you who have taken off your shoes, you have to kind of know and remember which is your shoe when you leave. And a week or so, 10 days ago, I didn't recognize my crocs. Or that the person, I recognized my crocs, but it was someone else's. I wasn't really paying enough attention.

And it was kind of amazing how I wasn't paying attention because they were actually bigger than mine. And maybe something about crocs, but I didn't notice until someone said, Gil, you know, you took so-and-so's crocs. And so I would, so... So there's knowing, you know, and we, you know, it's not just knowing the crocs, but knowing which is yours, which requires some memory. To know that, even to leave this room to find your crocs, you have to have some sense of direction, some sense of the spatial layout, some sense of going. One of the sensory capacities is spatial recognition, being able to recognize where things are in space.

Part of the ability to cognize is also visualizing. So you can close your eyes, maybe visualize this space. Or you can ask someone to close their eyes and visualize being at the beach and what it's like, the vast sky and the space. That's a way of knowing as well, from memory and from kind of... kind of the senses coming together, the visual sense kind of imagination coming into play. So imagination is a part of knowing. We can imagine.

I see the red light as I'm driving my car, the traffic light, and I say, you know, I don't really have to pay attention to that. And then I remember, I imagine, I see all the cars going zipping by. Well, I can imagine the consequence if I keep going. I think it's a good idea to stop. Yeah. So imagination and predicting the future is an important part of the cognitive world.

And kind of in Buddhism we say, you know, you're not supposed to do that. That's a simplistic way. Just be present in the present the way it is. And it's a big thing to learn to do that. But it turns out the present moment has to some degree contains the past and the future in it. It comes along almost naturally because we have this very rich, multifaceted capacity for

knowing and cognizing.

And then we integrate all this together. And there too, to be really centered in the present moment, so that's the ground where we're living in, That does not mean that we don't think about the past and the future, or that the past and the future doesn't come in to inform us about the present. It actually informs us better. It's richer, it spreads wider, the richness and the fullness of how we're in the present moment. And so as we practice mindfulness, there is a movement to what is called wholeness, for coming whole, to be inclusive. Everything's included.

And some people describe at some point in doing Buddhist meditation that there's a feeling that mind has become expansive. Our sense of beingness becomes expansive. Because it begins to encompass all these different attentional faculties we have, all the sensory faculties, cognitive faculties we have. They all can operate non-deliberately. We don't have to work at doing it. And many of them, most of them are some things that are operating here for us all the time anyway.

We're not trying to do that. Right. So one of the ways of practicing mindfulness is to do just enough deliberate emphasis on attention to start overcoming the forces of distraction, overcoming the ways in which we were not present because we're so preoccupied in thoughts and agendas, in the future, in the past, in our hurts, in our desires. And we're kind of wrapped up in, we're limiting ourselves so dramatically sometimes by being pulled into stories, pulled into some ideas, pulled into desires and aversions, that we don't really allow all this richness of all our faculties to operate at once together. So there comes a time when it's called unification that all this becomes unified, it comes into harmony, works together in a nice way. So maybe that's the egg that's needed to be born. Right.

And so we're cultivating this capacity to then be, I don't know if this is a good language, but I apologize if it's not. We're cultivating capacity to be impregnated, to allow something to happen to us that would can't happen if we're caught up and distracted and something that can really profound can happen that... that we're preparing ourselves for. And in Buddhism, there's this idea that we're preparing ourselves for something to be born, something to arise, something to... that we can't orchestrate, we can't create, we can't engineer. So what is it that we can know? What is it that is the... that can meet this capacity for awareness?

What can we know that might be the catalyst for something wonderful? So, before I say that, many years ago I read about a faculty in the... Maybe it's a cognitive faculty of the brain that operates normally for most people, but if that part of the brain, that cognitive faculty doesn't work. And it was kind of like almost unimaginable where this could be the case for me. Maybe

for you if you hear this. And that is that if a certain part of the brain is damaged, it doesn't work.

People can look at their own body, like look at their hand, and not recognize it as their own hand. Like, what? It's unimaginable to me, kind of. Of course this is my hand. But apparently there's a particular cognitive functioning part of the brain that makes that association, which is very practical, very useful to do. So that we know how to take care of it and relate to it all the time, almost maybe unconsciously we relate to it as something we have control over or affects us, or if it hurts, we know it's my pain, or whatever.

So we also, this sense of personhood, the sense of being a center, like this is also part of our sensory capacity. So what we can know... touches maybe this part of ourselves, touches something very personal, something that awakens something in this being, in your being, that is not meant to be depressing, not meant to be frightening, but with the right deep relaxation, opening up to this wide field of all our sensory capacities, touches something very profound in the individual... Maybe what's sacred in you, what's most valuable in you, what's a potential that you recognize in yourself. Yes, this is possible. And a little bit I'm inspired by this, by reflecting in the last week or so on *marāṇa-sati*, the reflection on death.

That is a Buddhist practice. And in deeper meditation, the brain quiets down. And maybe that center of the brain that's my brain, my meditation, my breathing quiets down too. And it's a beautiful thing to experience just being aware and present and awake without any operation of this me, myself and mine going on. That's nice. But there's also, I think, a really profound way that when people come close to their dying, their death and they know they're dying, like, uh-oh.

There's a kind of focus on themselves sometimes. Like, oh, I'm alive still. Oh, this is affecting me. Oh, I'd better get my affairs in order. I, some of the poignancy of being me and being alive and a living being now becomes richer, more meaningful, more significant. And some people, of course, bring along a lot of challenging ideas to that, what makes it harder for them or depressing or frightening.

But some people, it actually makes it very poignant that what's most important for them, this is what's most important for me. Right. Oh, but there's no self. You know, me, myself and mine, just drop it. No, this is a time to really take seriously that I have things to take care of. I have things I still want to do.

I want to practice. I've known people who were coming to their dying and decided, I'm not going to put off my practice anymore. I'm going to go and retreat. That seems the most im-

portant thing to do at this point. And so there's something about getting serious, something about being inspired, sometimes like getting organized around what's most important for us. That can happen in a very significant and different way when all our sensory attentional capacities are operating and we find ourselves at ease, at relaxed, present in the fullness, the aliveness of just here in this rich state.

Moment of now, which includes so, so much that we don't have to even do deliberately. It's just operating here to support us and guide us and ready for us and receptive. And something here can happen. So the path can be born in us. So what is it that can give birth to the path? What is this phenomenal thing that can happen? Right?

So, there to hear this, you maybe have to a little bit imagine yourself in a situation where you are most at ease, most peaceful, most awake in all your senses, and most feeling alive. Maybe this will do something for you. So, this is a very famous teaching in Buddhism called the Five Reflections. And there's a discourse that Buddha gave on this, and so I'll do a little bit of a synopsis of it. And this is one of the discourses where the Buddha taught, gave teachings specifically for monks, nuns, and lay men and lay women, and any other gender that is related here. So all people, whether lay or monastic, should contemplate, should consider these five subjects.

What five? And he puts it in the first person, so you're supposed to put it in your own voice. I am liable to grow old. I am not exempt from old age. A person should contemplate this. I am liable to get sick.

I am not exempt from sickness. I am liable to die. I am liable to die. I am not exempt from death. Before I go on to the next two, these three are named specifically as the reflections that Buddha had before he started his path to awakening. When he was still living in the world, there was something about this reflection that motivated him, I'm going to search for freedom.

Freedom from the suffering. Freedom from being oppressed. Freedom from being caught. Freedom. Intense, stressed, trapped by sickness, old age and death. Many of us can feel victims by these things as if they're unfortunate.

Is there a way to realize these are always a human possibility that rather than being depressing, gives birth to some seriousness, something profound, gives birth to the path or practice in you? Where the whole psychophysical system we're in is prepared and ready to get organized and motivated. Yes, yes, there's a practice here. There's a path here. Then the fourth one is, I must become parted and separated from all I hold dear and beloved. No one is ex-

empt from being separated from what is dear and beloved.

And the fifth one, I am the owners of my actions, the heir to my actions. Actions are my womb, my relative and my refuge. So what you do and how you behave is not inconsequential in Buddhism. You create your own refuge, your own safety, you create your own future, you condition your own kind of birth of all kinds of things, depending on how you act. So be careful. So then, the Buddha then goes on in this teaching to say the advantage, the benefit from doing this reflection.

And he says that verse 3 has something to do with certain kind of vanity or conceit. To have a vanity and conceit around youth, around health, and around being alive can be problematic. And we can see that. That... People have a lot of vanity around youth. And the amount of money spent in this modern society around staying young is probably in proportion of the amount of wealth that any society had, it's probably more than ever before.

The idea of youth is like glorified in such a big way. And then when people are no longer young, some people feel kind of you know, feel lousy or feel wrong, bad, or feel, you know, depressed or, you know, feel like, well, so much for that. So the Buddha says this, by contemplating I am liable to grow old, those who are intoxicated, so none of you, of course, those of you who are intoxicated with a vanity of youth, will do bad things of body, speech, and mind. So we'll do harmful things. So there's something about, you know, that strong attachment to youth and staying young, that people will do all kinds of things that may be harmful to others to keep it and be it that way. By contemplating I am liable to get sick. I am not exempt from sickness. Those who are intoxicated on the vanity of health will do harmful things with body, speech, and mind.

I mean, the amount of resources being spent for youth and health is kind of disproportionate in the world, and it's causing harm to have our capacities for health and to be spread out evenly through the population. What is the advantage of... So the advantage of contemplating I am liable to die... There are beings who intoxicated on the vanity of life do harmful things. What is the advantage of reviewing, I must be parted and separated from all that I hold dear and beloved? There are those beings, those people aroused by craving attachment to what is dear and beloved do harmful things. And the advantage of contemplating, I am the owner of my deeds, heir to my deeds, my actions, the actions are my womb, my relative and refuge. There are, and then there are beings who simply do harmful things without knowing how much harm they're doing to themselves.

So one of the things we see here is that Buddha is phenomenally concerned with not causing harm. This is one of the primary orientations around why the Buddha was teaching a path to

practice. To live a harmless life, to live a life we're not causing harm. It might seem puritanical, moralistic, it might seem like this can't be spiritual, to have this kind of emphasis. But we see the Buddha over and over again. So he's, how do we live a life that we don't cause harm?

But the path hasn't been born yet. This comes next. Okay. In addition, those beings who cultivate these reflections, who contemplate these, when they contemplate all beings age, no one exempt from aging, in them the path is born. That's the language he uses. The path is born.

And they grow, develop, and make much of this path. By doing so... They give up attachments and eliminate their biases. Isn't that remarkable? So there's something about this contemplation about, I'm not exempt from aging, that can give birth to the path of practice, the desire to practice this capacity we have. And it's not automatic.

And it's hard for someone who's been busy running around, you know, the full life to even imagine, like, why would that be the case? But maybe when you're really settled, really at home in yourself, kind of really feeling your aliveness that comes because all the sensory capacities you have are operating in a unified whole field. You're at ease. You're centered. You're calm. That gives a vantage point, that gives an orientation, an reference point to understand what it's like to not be that way.

And to reflect from that state, I'm going to age. There's no way around that. If I get involved in the vanity and the conceit of attachments around youth, that's to my own harm. I can feel what it's going to do to me. Why would I allow that to happen? I know an alternative. I know a different way of being.

If we're at peace and we recognize, can recognize, how when I get sick, how quickly there are attachments, how quickly there are resistance, angers, frustrations, a whole complex inner life gets awoken that causes us to get sicker because we react to it negatively. Why would I... I see there's an alternative. I don't have to get caught in that world of attachment. So the same thing with dying. It's possible in the last 10 minutes that you're alive, if you know you're about to die, and someone comes to you and says, oh, by the way, there's a problem. You know, there's really a big problem. But I'm going to die in 10 minutes. Yeah, yeah, but this is really important. So, Your credit card company overcharged you. And, you know, we have to take care of this. What are you going to do? Yes. This is like the most important thing. I only have 10 minutes left to be alive, and this is what I should spend doing.

For someone who's a practitioner, knowing you're going to die, knowing you'd die in 10 minutes, what gets born in you? What gets awakened in you? Do you have something better to

do than to be afraid of what's coming? For practitioners, for people who have cultivated this capacity to be awake, to be aware, to be here, with all their senses open, be able to step out of the deliberate intentional preoccupations that the self has, to really rest in this wholeness that's possible. And find that to be a place of peace, maybe of awe, of freedom, maybe of love and care and compassion. What if that was the alternative than calling up the credit card company and be put on hold?

Those last ten minutes. Listening to that music. What if the alternative is the path? The path that lives in you, that you know it is you. The path that you've cultivated and developed and grown. What if that is what? And so this reflection, these five reflections that some Buddhists do every day, they recite it to themselves as a reminder, is not to be reminded, not to remind us of how depressing it is, Yes, it's really depressing that you're not going to be able to take care of your credit card bills. And it's going to awaken something, inspire something. This is what's important. This is what I want my life to be about. This is the path that I can have.

So the meeting of these things, so we have this practice that's cultivating the richness, the fullness of the of our attentional capacities for being at rest, at ease here at this time and place. And that includes our cognitive capacities to know. And at some point, life teaches us, brings us something very profound to know that awakens this path, awakens the way-seeking mind, awakens the desire to give birth to the fullness of what this path of practice can do for you. And may it happen sooner than in the last ten minutes of your life. Because, yeah, it's best to prepare for that. May it awaken today.

So those are my thoughts for today. And it takes a few minutes from the setup, the Patluk. So for those of you who can stay and are staying for the Patluk,