

## Dharma Talk: Nature's Growing and Healing

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It is quite a sight to sit here and see you all. It kind of really inspires me, it warms my heart. I feel gratitude, appreciation. It's quite a wonderful thing to be sharing this and to be able to kind of share it with you, but also kind of see you in this way. And so I'm very grateful that we have this chance and grateful for this place that we get to do this practice in. And I hope that the natural world here has been one of your teachers so far this first day.

And so I've been reflecting today that life is often hard for people. And I kind of think that just to get to adulthood is a huge success. Whatever it took to get to adulthood, whatever coping mechanisms you had, whatever support you had, whatever challenges you overcame. Some people don't make it to adulthood. And I'd like to appreciate that as an accomplishment. Some of you may have made it to 30 or 40 or more.

It's quite something that all this, how difficult this world can be. And I think one of the things that powerful instinct in human beings is their survival instinct. And people will do a lot of things for survival. And one of the survival instincts that people have is to fight. Fight and flight. Escape, run away.

It's well known, this expression of fight and flight, fight and freeze. What's less well known, I think, is the opposite, which sometimes has been called approach and sue. I like calling it approach and nurture. Imagine there's a cutest newborn baby. Right? I think every newborn baby is cute.

Cutest one. And it's laying there somewhere. Just, it won't stop crying. It's kind of irritating. So one approach is to fight it. You know, you better toughen up.

This is a tough world and I'm going to toughen you up and get you to stop. You know, I'm going to duke it out with you until you stop. The other strategy is to run away. It's needed to

go far enough either way, you don't hear it. Those strategies would be a disaster for the baby. Those strategies might succeed in some way for the adult in the short term, but it doesn't support the long-term well-being of the baby.

There's another survival mechanism we have, and that is this approach and nurture to care. And for the long-term well-being of that baby... Someone should come and hold the baby. Don't let it cry alone. Who knows what it means? Maybe it just needs contact and someone to hold it.

Maybe it's hungry and needs food. It needs the nurse to bring it to its mother. And I've been around newborn babies, and it wasn't so clear to me who was benefiting the most. Me holding them, they were crying and settling them. Was it, were they the ones who benefited from them most, or was it me? I just felt all kind of warm and soft and sweet and content.

It felt really nice, especially when you're successful. Just holding them and caring for them. So I don't know who benefits the most. But I will say that the consequence of a care like that, that's what's needed for long-term survival. Sometimes, you know, if the mountain lions, what we had, and it happened to us at a couple of years, we lived up in the mountains and the peninsula, and I looked out my window, and my son, who was just beginning to walk, and left him in the garden outside the house, just for a couple minutes to go get something.

But it was just long enough for me to look out the window And in the yard there was a coyote stalking him, and he was curled up in a kind of fetus position, fetal position. So that happened quickly. So what did I do? I didn't run away. I ran out there, ready to do whatever was needed to care for that small kid, even if it meant fighting the coyote, whatever it took. And if the coyote maybe had really gotten dangerously close, you know, for the survival of that kid in the moment, that would have maybe been the right thing.

Just the fact that I ran out there was the right thing. So that works sometimes in the short term. And it's successful. And it's partly why people do these things, fights and fights and things. But they're not really what's needed for the long term. And if we live a life where the strategy is fighting and flying and freezing, we are shortchanging ourselves from the very nourishment that allows for the long-term survival of ourselves, for our family, for our communities, for our societies.

And as we see societies in the world right now that think that they are fighting for survival, and the survival they're fighting for is really myopic. for the short term, for now. I've been struck by how long the suffering of war lasts. I've known people, I'm old enough to know all kinds of people, I went through all kinds of things, and I can give you a list of horrible things I've

known people experienced in their lives, and how the legacy of that continues, continues in my own family. World War II had a big impact on my family and my wife's family, even bigger. And my children have been following in the legacy of the experience of their grandparents.

And that was 80 years ago, a long time. It goes on for generations. And so to find another way to appreciate maybe the fighting, maybe the flighting, maybe it was a short-term survival instinct that worked, made a difference. By the way, it becomes a chronic instinct. It becomes the policy. Then we shortchange ourselves from the kind of deeper nourishment, the deeper kind of wellspring of what helps long-term survival in a good, nourishing, supportive way for ourselves and for the world.

And so to be able to shift modes is part of a task of this practice. to learn to recognize how we are, to recognize how we've ended up the way we are, to feel it, to know it well, and for some of what we experience is our tensions, our pains, our suffering, our hurts, our regrets, our disappointments and griefs. There are so many things that are in this mix that can be quite painful. That some, I know people who... Every time they touch it, get close to it, they recoil. And sometimes when they recoil, I know some people, they're recoiling from it means that now they're going to get angry with someone else. And they're going to find someone to be angry with because they just have to get away from their own pain.

And then they perpetuate it out into the world. But when we come to Dharma practice, part of the value of sitting in the present moment accepting the present moment is not for those, just because it feels good, but that's the beginning of a very profound process of healing and growth that we're capable of. I love the title of Tara Brock's book, Radical Acceptance, and I haven't read the book. There's books I just like, your titles. And so she might, they talk about this in the book, but Radical acceptance is really a powerful practice, a wonderful thing to do. But it's not the end result of the practice.

It's the beginning. The practice only really begins when we have this radical acceptance. Then there's space for this inner growth to happen. Then there's space for healing, for the heart to do its inner work. But to really do this well, the kind of dharma work, dharma growth, Dharma transformation, there needs to be some kind of acceptance of how we are and what we are. So we're not perpetuating the fighting, not perpetuating the shutting down, not perpetuating the very activities that are keeping us divided from ourselves.

And I think one of the lessons for me has been that of these two different modes, fight, blame, guilt, attack, freeze, shut down, go numb. Of those, that shuts us down. That's only part of ourselves has a chance to come alive. And it has a way of pushing aside, repressing, denying, ignoring, whole parts of who we are. To always live in fear, to always live in anger, to always

live, trying to get what you want out of greed, always trying to push away at a hostility. We are becoming separate from our whole.

We're picking up part of what we are. One is a particular survival instinct at the expense of leaving out the whole of who we are, the wholeness of who we are. And there's something about approach and nurture, care, that slows things down, that calls on much more of who we are. And it's something that comes from our depths, I believe. Fighting, you need your muscles. And the muscles are more on the surface.

Running away, you use your muscles. So it's kind of like the external, it's a surface way of living in the world. The approach and nurture, approach and nurture ourselves, approach and care, approach and accept what's here in a deep way, that begins to allow the whole to be here. It allows a wellspring of attention, of love, of care, so that we start becoming whole rather than staying partial, where part of ourselves is kind of offline. So this process of radical acceptance is a process of also being so accepting that no part is left out. We start to think, this too can be included, this too.

And that's kind of the mantra of insight practice, this too. Whatever arises in the moment, we say this too, we can include. We don't have to, that's not a judgment that it's good, but... And this is a problem with the word acceptance. Acceptance can look like or feel like condoning something, but that's not what we want to do. Some things don't want to be condoned.

But there's something about having a non-reactive attention to who we are and what's happening that is transformative. Something very different can happen when we take our time to feel and sense and recognize what's here and maybe accept what's here. in a caring mode, caring mindfulness. Sometimes people call it kind mindfulness. And so I think probably all of you know the story of that, from the parable of the Buddha, about that two arrows, that it's worse to say again maybe, that he said to a group of people, I imagine it's about the size of the group that's here today, He said to them, if someone, an archer, shoots an arrow into a person, will that hurt the person?

And they all say, yeah, that'll hurt. If the archer shoots a second arrow into the same person, is that going to hurt even more? And they say, yeah, that's going to hurt even more. And then to paraphrase him, he said, the second arrow is what we do to ourselves. The first arrow is life. We can't protect ourselves from suffering.

We can't accept ourselves from pain. We can't protect ourselves from emotional difficulties and challenges. People die and tragedies happen. We'll trip and twist our ankle for no fault of our own. That's the first arrow. The second arrow is what we do, what we add.

We criticize ourselves. Boy, I'm the world's worst walker that I sprained my ankle. You know, it's unfortunate I ate too much supper. That's not a second arrow. Boy, am I a bad Vipassana student. Then I should be so terrible, not pay attention, not be mindful, and look at me, and I hope no one noticed.

It's rather embarrassing. And we can make these stories, and we keep shooting arrows at ourselves. And that's kind of to fight. That doesn't feed. That doesn't nourish, that doesn't allow the growth of something. Referring back to that baby, babies, the Nuremberg babies are in process of beginning their growth.

It's physical growth, it's also psychological growth, emotional growth. And so we want to create the conditions for all that growth to happen beautifully, wonderfully, through the growing up age. And as we know, that people have horrible things happen to them as children. that curtails or interrupts and makes difficult some of the deeper natural capacities we have for human development, human growth. The contribution of Buddhism to maybe, but I don't know if it's this unique contribution, to humanity, is that our growth doesn't stop when we turn 18 or 21. Maturation is something that happens throughout a whole lifetime.

And so what we're doing in Dharma practice is creating conditions so that through our care, through our acceptance, through our attention, through our non-reactivity, with our honesty of what's here, that we can allow some of the natural capacities of our heart, natural capacities of our inner life, to do what they're capable of doing. We don't have to be... 100% responsible for our healing. We don't have to be 100% responsible for resolving all our inner foibles that we might have. It's remarkable to engage in a practice like this because it allows, makes room for something profound to grow, something deep to resolve itself, something to unfold and evolve, to heal, We have, we are natural living systems, and natural living systems are evolving, changing, growing systems that are following their own patterns, their own capacities, their own potential. And our potential as a human being is phenomenal.

It just astounds me how much... complicated as to be a human being. The analogy I'd like to make is that of, you know, if you're in your kitchen and cut your finger, you probably couldn't, even if you knew the chemistry and the biology and the physiology and hormones and all that's involved in healing that cut, I suspect no one knows all the different things that are involved in healing the cut. But say you do, I don't think you could then engineer it. I don't think you can just kind of make it happen. You have to allow it to happen, and you don't have to know all the details.

What you have to do is keep the cut clean, to not pick the cut. You have to keep it clean so the natural process of healing has its best chance to work. That's true with emotional pain.

We have the... we're designed somehow to be people who feel deeply. It's a very important part of the human life is to feel deeply, to feel the whole range of emotions. They're there for good reasons.

They're part of how we understand our life, navigate our life, respond to life. But their emotional life is part of also a deep system that has its own capacity for healing. If we get out of the way, if we keep it clean, if we don't put the second arrow then, And if everything, and independent of how we're wounded, then we also have phenomenal capacity to grow in wisdom, to grow in freedom, to grow in understanding, to grow in kindness and generosity, to grow in stability, maturity and strength. This practice mindfulness is not supposed to make us weak, it's to make us grow strong. but not strong that we're better at fighting, but strong so we can show up fully in this world to allow the world's capacity for healing to happen. Our relationships have capacities for healing also, and we can't guarantee that it'll happen, but a lot goes on if we show up in some other mode than fight and flight.

If we show up with kindness, with generosity and care, One of the common, I don't know, in many places, advice people are given is, I've done this to people, I've taken it from myself even as advice. If you have social challenges with someone, give them a gift. I think the most common situation where I've done that would suggest that to people, if someone has a huge trouble with their in-laws, just give them a little, every time you go there, make sure you give them a small gift, nothing big. Look, I'd make some bread for you or just this. And I've had people come back and say, What? There's profound capacities here that we're tapping into for this practice.

This practice is not simplistic, even though it's supposed to be simple. This practice is not just simply learning to be stress-free. It's to become deeply fulfilled. to be filled. The Buddha uses this kind of language to become abundant in the wholesome. I always overlooked the section of the suttas, this teaching, for a long time where this came out, because it's in the discussion of right effort.

And coming from Zen, I was allergic to any discussion about effort. Even though Zen involves applying a lot of effort, But the rhetoric was, you know, no gaining idea, just show up, don't try to make anything happen. And so, you know, so they knew if there's effort, it was like, effort seemed like striving, effort seemed like it was making something happen rather than just allowing or something. So I didn't pay much attention to where the Buddha talked about right effort. But he said, if the wholesome states arise, let them grow, let them expand. Let them become abundant.

Let them come to fulfillment. I mean, when I saw that, I said, wow, my early decades of Bud-

dha's practice, they never told me that. It was more like, just let go. And if you talked about how you really had great joy, let go. One more thing to let go of. Aren't you lucky?

The Buddha never said to let go of these things. He said, make them abundant. Right? So we have these different instincts, we have these different approaches and ways of living. And when we start paying careful attention to it, I think one of the things we start learning is how detrimental it is to engage in the whole gamut of approaches that fit under that category of fight and flight and freeze. It shuts us down, it disconnects us from huge parts of who we are, It doesn't allow, make room for our inner growth and maturation and development.

But it's possible through this practice because we're feeling, we're sensing, we're showing up, we're trying to be honest here with what's happening, right? To accept fully what's happening here. Then we start feeling it and knowing it and seeing in a deep way. We see the impact. We see the cost. We see the cost.

that sometimes some of us are still living the cost of ways we've lived our life for years and decades. And when we stop to sit down, we can feel, oh look at that. Even through this day, and I've done this practice for so long, so I can live my life, you know, completely involved in something, studying the Dharma, teaching me the Dharma, supporting the Dharma. And I don't even notice that I've gotten a little bit agitated and tense. And then I sit down, oh, look at that. I'm like a little bit worked up here, teaching people not to get it worked up.

And it's so good to sit and feel that. I'm a little bit worried. What I would have become if it wasn't for the Dharma. I don't think it would have been very pretty. But this Dharma, you get to sit with it and see it and know it. And there was one point in my practice that People used to tell me, oh, you're seen angry.

And I wasn't angry. It was impossible because it didn't fit my self-image. So, of course I wasn't for myself, but everyone else thought I was. And then slowly, I started to discover it. Slowly start to feel and notice, oh, wait a minute, it's here, it's here. There it is again.

There's resentment. There's hostility. There's anger. There's a shutting down, there's getting tense, there's getting tight around this. And so through the practice, I started to see it. And so seeing it that allowed me, feeling it, that allowed me to shift, allowed it to settle and relax.

I spent a lot of time discovering how afraid I was. That was a hugely important part of my monastic life. How was monastic life? Scared. I wasn't scared of monastic life. I loved monastic life.

But it kind of showed me. how much deeper anxiety I carried with me all the time. And so that was a big part of monastic life, was to feel it and see it. And slowly it changed. And the

remarkable thing was, I didn't do the change. In Zen practice, one of the great, amazingly wonderful things about Zen is how little they explain to you and how little instruction you get.

I mean, when you look at us, what we do in Vipassana, They just like scratched their heads and they can't believe it. But it was so wonderful to not get any instruction, to just feel and know and recognize over and over and over again, and practice as radical acceptance. Like then I call it unconditional acceptance. And then it started to change and transform. And in retrospect, I discovered... I didn't even see the change that was happening, but I discovered that was being changed by at all.

I wasn't engineering it, I wasn't trying to do it, fix it, I wasn't trying to get good instructions to get in there and do, you know, mental surgery. I was just sitting with it, breathing with it, over and over feeling it. And I believe what that did was I got more and more out of the way of it. I was keeping the wound clean. so that the natural process of healing and settling and relaxing and shedding could happen. And in the process of that, one of the big surprises, because I had no interest in this, was that I thought I was there for enlightenment.

No. What happened instead was I got compassionate. I got compassion. Which would you rather do? Get compassion or enlightened? If you have to choose one or the other, you can't have both.

I don't know. I might choose compassion. So that's kind of a wider context for what this practice is about. It's very deep work, very, very deep. It's some of the deepest work you can do in this life for yourself. It's what allows for some of the greatest potential you have to become abundant, to grow and develop.

but you have to keep the room clean, or you have to create the conditions that give space and room for something to grow and develop. And so if you're always distracted and telling stories, then you're not giving the kind of deep inner room for something to be born, something to grow. And it's probably not a coincidence that the Buddha, when he talked about how he became enlightened, the catalyst for his own awakening, and that it was something that was arising from, literally, the word that he used is from the womb. Talk about a natural process. Whatever it goes in the womb, that's another phenomenal, complicated, sophisticated thing to do to release in babies to grow in the womb. And for the Buddha to refer to the deep way that he contemplated, the deep way that he paid attention, that it was from the womb, from this profound place inside, that is not an engineering job.

It's not trying to understand to fix the problem. It's to allow the present, here, now, sense,



care, the word that's *yonī*, that's *vawum*. In this one, when I first went to Buddha, the process by which the Buddha became enlightened, the translator Bhikkhu Bodhi translated the womb, the word *yonī*, as care. I love it. Care. And I translate it as profound.

And, but I kind of really like care. We have this profound place of care. putting the two words together. Or there are cares, a profound place. So how do you sit here on retreat? How do you walk on retreat?

How do you conduct yourself on the retreat so that your ability to be aware, your attention is not a mental technique of just noting or just meant knowing, knowing, knowing or something. but that your mindfulness, your attention, your knowing, your cognitive knowing, even if you do use noting, even your noting, is arising from this deep place of care from within. What would they look like? How can you tap into that? How can you be still enough, quiet enough? So something inside, something not in your muscles, not in your stories, but something deep within is held Like you may be like you'd hold the baby.

You hold your breathing. So what is it like to hold your experience? And what if it's not you that's doing the holding? Like up in the head, you know, like directing the show, okay, let's hold this. What if holding is a natural capacity from this deep place within that you can recognize what's here and that something profound care... can well up in the attention, in the awareness that you have. And you're here to hold it, to be with it, to make room for things.

I love sometimes calling, referring to breath meditation, or that breath meditation, when you're doing it to give breathing room to everything. We don't get locked into the breath, but there's something about riding, surfing on the breath, obviously getting absorbed in the breath, dipping into the breath, sensing and feeling the breath. That makes space in the mind. The mind gets quieter. Still, they're more expansive. And we can start giving breathing room to our experience.

Breathing room to the thinking mind. Breathing room to our physical pain. Breathing room to our irritations. Breathing room to our desires and breeds. Give it breathing room. Not so that it can have a party, So there's room for it to expand and evaporate or grow or unfold or transform.

Trust that there's something deep inside. Trust the Dharma, trust the natural processes that you have. And your job, your responsibility, is to show up. Your job is to keep being in the present moment the best you can without fighting, without struggling, without straining, but the best you can, really vigilantly, diligently, show up here, be aware of what's here, recognize, feel, sense, be with what's here, and trust, and have faith or trust or confidence that the

Dharma is here to support you, to guide you, to transform you. And where is that Dharma? Where is that Dharma?

It's always in you. The Dharma is no different than you. So to trust this personal Dharma, trust, make room for it. And I know the first day of a retreat can be difficult, as I said the other day with sleepiness and pain and headaches and all kinds of things. But there's a way in which the more the difficulties we have, the greater the challenge, the more likely it is that it relates to something deeper within us. The more we get upset, the more we get activated, it's probably because we now have touched something really important deep inside.

So it's not a mistake on retreat that you have challenges. Maybe that's what you're here for. So you can give breathing room to that, make room for that. This too is included. This too is allowed to be here. This too I'm going to practice radical exceptions for.

This too I'm not going to try to fix. I'm going to make room for it. where we give permission for everything to be there, so that we can grow, so we can allow the natural process of growth, transformation, healing to unfold. That process can't happen without you offering something to this practice, but it can't, but you can't make it happen. So offer your attention, Offering your awareness, offering your honesty and the truth, and the best of your ability, offer an inner stability, an inner steadiness. Here, this too I'm going to include, and receive it in my steadiness.

And if you need a reminder of how glorious your natural inner life is, the nature that's in you, and all that can do, then go for a walk in the forest. Look at the clouds, the sky, the trees. Listen to the frogs. Let them be a mirror for how marvelous you are. Miracle you are. It's not any different than the miracle of what we see here. Thank you.