

## Dharma Talk: Non-Clinging

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So I'm very happy to be here. Big Springs for this retreat. There's many reasons for that happiness. One of them is, if I was correctly connected to the purpose of being here for this retreat, the orientation I have for the teaching, is that the way I interpret or read, or teach in teaching, the Buddha, the way I present Buddhism, I think of it as naturalistic, kind of a naturalistic Buddhism. And what I mean by that is that it's an approach to practicing Buddhism and understanding Buddhism through the perspective we can know directly for ourselves. And not just through thinking about it or logic, but through the way that we can directly experience what's wholesome and unwholesome, directly know what is painful and what is pleasure, that we can have a kind of a direct knowledge that we can understand the path of practice.

We can know how to practice. We can find our way. And so, I don't think of Buddhism as a philosophy. And the odd word that I use, in contrast to that, it's a sensitivity. Not looking to understand philosophy of religion, but rather we're looking to develop a personal sensitivity that we can sense, see, understand really well what's happening in the present moment. And so in this way, it doesn't involve beliefs so much as it does knowing.

And I hear many presentations on Buddhism one way or the other. They're kind of expecting me to believe something. And some of the common ones is, and I heard lots of these talks when I was on Thailand and Burma, on the three characteristics. So that, and there'll be this declarative statements that everything is impermanent. Everything is suffering. Everything is not self. There's no self in anything.

And when I was in Burma, I was kind of perplexed by this. It seemed like such declarative statements. And it seemed like it was something we were supposed to believe. And through that belief, kind of lived a better life. Just if you logically knew, understood, or believed in these teachings. And I came to a different conclusion from doing the practices of mindfulness.

What I could say is that I don't know about all things. I don't think of Buddhism as a kind of physics that's going to explain all things in the universe and how they work. That's an orientation that's very common in the West, that religion somehow provides ultimate understanding of reality, ultimate understanding of the cosmos, of the nature of life or something ultimate. And that's very different from a naturalistic Buddhism. It doesn't actually look for ultimate understandings. The text that is on the earliest, considered on the earliest text in Buddhism, called the Book of Eights, which I translated and published with Shambhala, the title of the book is Buddha before Buddhism.

By the way of the term of Buddha, the Buddha-Zinn as a religion and belief system, that arose long after the Buddha. And so what did he have to teach before the religion of Buddhism arose? And this very early text kind of gives you a good sense of that. And the amazing things he talks about there is that he has no interest or see any value in ultimate truths. That ultimate truths are not where freedom is found. Ultimate truths is not where peace is found. And that instead, as he says, peace is found through non-claiming.

And non-claiming belongs to the area of our own sense of sensitivity, or if we can know for ourselves, or if we recognize for ourselves, and what we can cease to stop doing. It is possible for my color of cleaning. And it's not a big supernatural thing. It's not a belief system. You kind of have to have some confidence when you sign up at the local community college for class and study French. You have to believe that the teacher knows French to sign up.

So we have a lot of ordinary beliefs that we kind are a matter of fact. So it helps to believe that you can develop a strong sensitivity, belief that you can make choices that lead in a good direction. Or you can make choices that bring more suffering. So there's a kind of beliefs, but those are pragmatic beliefs. Like you believe that it's useful if you cut yourself to put a bandage on the cuts. It's good. So there's a difference between these practical, pragmatic beliefs and metaphysical beliefs, supernatural beliefs.

And some of these imbues are meant to do with the nature of consciousness, the nature of ultimate experience, all of *nibbāna*. And here in this earliest text of the Nirgay, or both are supposedly the heartless spoke, he shows no interest in ultimate things. He says, because retreats it as kind of a waste of time. It's not to the point of becoming three or 20. And in this early text, there's a, but I think a very powerful autobiographical piece. The whole thing is made up of verses. But there's about five verses that the Buddhist says, before he was awakened, that he was alarmed and distressed by all the suffering of the world, how people ran around like fish in shallow water, walking around dorcas, upset in conflict with each other, and they kind of described some of the challenges of his era that people went in, how it was

distressing for him, and then he said at that then I saw the arrow or the barb, the dart and the heart, and I pulled it out, and then there was peace.

So, he's not looking for ultimate truths, not looking for supernatural truths, not looking for to understand the cosmos and reality and the true nature of things. He was looking for that arrow in the heart, the heart, looking for what is it that we carry in ourselves that is a genesis, the source, of the emotional pain that we can have, that we can do something about. And that's the enterprise that the Buddha is offering. And the process for doing that is to, and the reason for developing mindfulness, is to be able to really see clearly for yourself. As I like to say, with this path, we're looking to become our own teacher, and not looking for others to be the teachers. And so we're learning to kind of wake up and learning how to study yourselves, how to pay attention.

And this is where some of the Buddhist teachings are helpful. And in a naturalistic way, he says that there's, you can tell, in yourself, what is wholesome and what is not wholesome? It feels healthy and not healthy. And the more sensitive you are, the more you develop an embodied sensitivity, emotional sensitivity, and mental sensitivity to what goes on, the way you recognize it, the clearer you can feel the difference between what is healthy and what's not healthy. And the more your work present form, stable, and kind of grounded here in this experience, it also gives you the opportunity to be able to make choices in relationship to that. Not a few people find that they have no choice about the view. If I had after they started doing it, that they're doing it.

Sometimes people regret what they say, because if they just blow it out and they're going to friendship for 20 years, or they grab a subject, some kind of substance that they're addicted to, that they're... or comfort themselves with, but it's so automatic that they find themselves out to their back, drinking or eating or something. So the ability to be grounded, rooted here, enough, and you can see the choices that the mind wants to make. And rather than the mind making the choice, you make the choice, no, that's unhealthy, that's unwise. So this ability to choose that comes out of seeing, so it's not moralistic. It's not some ethical system that is out there instead of rules. It's not believing that one thing is what you should do, but rather is learning from yourself what is healthy and who is vulnerable.

So when I studied Zen, practiced Zen, and I did Vipassanā, I certainly began each of them with a certain kind of, I don't know if I'd say, belief in them, but I gave them the benefit of it out. They're supposed to be good, good things to do. And so I followed the instructions. But at some point, the instructions were not external to me. At some point, I started to get known and recognized what wanted to happen, what was the call, what was the movement. What

was the way forward? To greater health, away from things unhealthy.

To greater freedom, and away from that where I lost my freedom, I was caught. And so the momentum of practice was not because of some assured. It was built into the sensitivity of how the path opens in front of me, and that's where you go. So the idea of the path is a metaphor that's quite common in Buddhism, the middle path, the middle way, and how I understand the metaphor, especially in the jungles of forests of India, there's lots of dense forests, is that a path is a clearing in which there's nothing. And then there you can walk. You can feel this freedom, this ease in the clearing in the forest.

And that's the function of a path in the forest, is to create this empty space in which you can walk. And at the empty space, bounded on either side by the forest, it kind of is clear where the path is. There's no question, oh here's the path to walk. So at some point when we practice the *Dhamma*, at some point we see the path in front of us. We see the light bulb. We feel it, we know it. And it's, there's a certain kind of absence that teaches us, shows us, this is the light bulb.

This is good. And that absence is primarily characterized not by some great teaching about emptiness. The naturalistic teachings of the early Buddhist teachings don't really teach emptiness as a philosophy or emptiness as a beginner practice or that you have to believe something you have to understand, but rather something that is revealed to the practitioner and the practice is really mature. The three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and not self, are not meant to be beliefs. They're meant to be insights, perceptions. We would call them perceptions or recognitions, something that we can see and recognize for ourselves. So this empty space is not exactly the same as the philosophy of emptiness.

It's just the sinful absence of greed, hatred, delusion, the absence of pulling, craving, the absence of conceit. There's many different ways of understanding what's in that absence. And different people kind of will see in the absence, you know, what there is absence in my cleaning. There's the absence in my shane, there's the absence of different things. Maybe because of what they came with, came with them, what they struggled with in their life. And so it gets highlighted for them that in that absence, there's a particular quality which is no longer there. But the absence in the forest shows three things that are very important.

One is it shows the way to walk. This is where we live. This is how to say, what to do, how to live life. Into that empty space, there's a clearing, there's a freedom, there's a ease, where, and if you go, bear off the path, you very quickly get the message, this is not a good thing. You're in a thick jungle and it might be impenetrable. It might be actually painful to get, push your way through the brush. In a thick jungle, you might easily get lost.

I was once in a 12-hour into a jungle somewhere in the tropics. And I think I went about 15 feet and now it's time to go, oh, I'll never find my way out of the body further. It I've been tried by the back one I've many post-country many places on my way but all the trees were exactly the same there was no markers there was no canopies above me there was no sense of the sun shadows. No way through the view or the mountains or the poles and distance. It was just all these very ordinary, built in the middle. I don't know if the plot's ordinary, but they all looked very similar. There's nothing that showed me where I'd been and how I'd walk, but there was no way of getting oriented.

So I turned around quite all I could. Anyway, so if you go off to the right, you're going to go off. If you go off to the left, you're going to go down. And what that means in this naturalistic approach is that you can feel the non-climbing, you can feel the ease, the peace, you feel that this is nice to be kind of light and calm and open and new. And then you feel when you're losing that. So if you want to do something unethical, you know, rather than looking up in the manual and say, is this okay to do? Is this ethical or not ethical? And then you go home and you stop doing it. As you start doing it, even thinking about it, you can feel, as you're starting to get going into the jungle, you can feel like this means suffering, this means tension, this means a reduction in the sensitivity, losing the wholeness that's there in the open space.

And you can feel how it's deleterious to oneself, how much you're harming yourself. And why would you do that? Why would you feel a spike as you step down and continue to move your weight on the spike? You pull back. You don't want to harm yourself that way. So the evidence is so personal coming from this deep sensitivity. If you want to do something that's greedy, if you want to have aid.

There's all kinds of things that when you're really present, you feel you're losing something that being involved in that. You're losing that open, clear space. There's a freedom to travel, freedom to move, and there's peace and certain happiness. And this becomes more and more obvious as this Buddha's practice will choose. And there's really a considered in the tradition, a real moment that maybe it's a moment, experience that moment is different for different people. But a moment when non-clinging is so clear, so obvious, so full, so complete, and makes an impression in you. It makes an impression maybe you'll never forget.

This is good. This is healthy. I have no idea that this may have been possible, because many people, there are layers and layers of flame, attachment, of cravings that just comes, human nature just comes with being a human being. And so it's so part of the landscape, part of the fabric of our being, that we don't even see it. We don't even know some of it. And so, you know, there's no personal reference point you know, how radical the letting go of grasping

can be. But as the practice goes, it becomes strong enough, clear enough, this non-cleaning that it, some people are law, some people are deeply inspired, some people, you know, have this kind of clear enough sense of non-cleaning that they're never quite the same again.

Some of them have it, and they have this now, and now I know what the practice is. And that's an ancient idea, Buddhism. It's a little bit discouraging, really. But there's an ancient idea that your Buddhist practice, it doesn't even begin before you have a clear enough personal experience, sense of non-feminine. And now you know what it's about. And that ancient people who had this idea, they called the practice, the practice you did before this experience of non-cleaning. They called it the path of preparation. We're getting ready to have this, to cease this in the third way.

And so this non-cleaning becomes a very useful teaching force. And it becomes a reference point for how the kindness of our life. And it's very useful, but even so that the conditioning, the beliefs we have are so strong that we're supposed to cling, we're supposed to get angry, we're supposed to in some way be domineering, just take care of ourselves, something. So all these, you know, culturally there's all these strong beliefs that we have to do things in a certain way. But the sad thing is, is one of those things inherent in them involve us being claiming, which from this deep sensitivity we learn involves suffering, tension, pain. And so it takes a while sometimes to contend and work through the social forces of your living. And I've got math, but is it okay, Dan? Not that they would be angry. There's a lot of people who are expecting me to be angry, not only angry but outrage. And maybe they're right. Maybe I should just be angry just so it could please them.

I was struggling trying to figure out things. And sometimes we had one particular time in my life that took a few years to sort this out. Because I had this kind of, what about the not cleaning? I was supposed to be angry, which is a kind of cleaning. But until it took me a couple of years to decide that, so I'm not likely how to say it, but I like to say that I felt committed and I trusted more for me. But that's not quite right. The way that's right too. But something more kind of wonderful is that I saw that if I go down the anger route or the greed route, I diminished myself. I lessened myself. I contracted myself. And why would I harm myself that way?

Why would I live and do that to myself? I think I can be much more effective in meaningfulness for them to have known the feeling. And if not, thinking is not good enough. Boy are we in trouble if not cleaning is not great enough and it kind of had no hope so all of you are it's pretty phenomenally wonderful that you're here. There's not a lot of people in this world who show up to be present for themselves and to cultivate this deeper sensitivity, this

deeper commitment to this naturalistic experience of being mindful, be present, here, being grounded and stable here, and become quiet enough, or still enough, sensitive enough, that you can start seeing the choices you make and that some choices are not there yet. And I suspect many of you are calmer now the more the day you came. Many of you have maybe a greater sensitivity. Something has slowed down. And in that slowing down, in that calmer state, state, or grounded state, or something, and I was made this a range of things that could be, but somehow you're different, you know, that you can notice when your mind goes to pick up what you're doing before. And you say, no, thank you. Well, how can I do that now?

It's like I could be suddenly very excited, and I realized, of course we are to *nibbāna*. And I think, you know, you guys have been working hard, and so we have one full day left, and what is it? And now we're called Deserved, Have Some Fun. So guess what? I ordered these wonderful party buses to come and get us. And we're going to go to the casinos. And it'll be fun. There's a lot of people there that they're happy, they're really happy. And the drinks are on the house. I mean, just suggesting that to you, even joking about it probably has now agitated you. I apologize.

But that contrast is, I made this make the point, the contrast is so dramatic that you can do it normally, most of you. You've done all this good work. Why would you sacrifice it so easily? Why would you give up? That's a dramatic example of what we start doing in more and more subtle ways. We see that we have a sense of peace or ease, I love the means, sense of ease. We have a sense of happiness and a non-clinging, non-grasping that feels healthy, wholesome. And that as we become more attuned to it, more aligned with it, we live our life guided by it. We stay close to it. And then Excuse me. Coming along with that is the idea of we become the Eightfold Path.

If you look at the most of the steps in the *Eightfold Path*, they mostly refer to a lot of absences. So the second Eightfold Path is like intention, like resolve, and it's defined as non-attached and non-wanting, a non-attached. Attachment to central divine. It's the absence of something. So if you have no clinging, then, excuse me, so if you have no attachment, then you won't have any inclination to cruelty. You don't have any inclination to hatred. You don't have any inclination to clinging to sensual values. And you fulfill the second factor they will have. In a sense, become it. Right speech, what to do or what you don't, is defined by what you don't do mostly. You don't rhyme. Absence of rhyme is Right action is defined as the absence of killing, the absence of stealing, and the absence of sexual misconduct.

So it's an absence. So if you have no clinging, then you kind of won't do any of those things, even without any contention not to do them, you simply wouldn't. And then right livelihood

is also defined by the absence. And if you could do some kind of analysis of that last three factors, of right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. There's a lot to do with absence. The right effort has a lot to do, half of it has to do with letting go of unwholesome activities. Concentration has a lot to do with letting go. So the first teaching I got in Theravāda Buddhism. The first time I went to Thailand, I went to a little monastery in Bangkok. First thing I heard from someone says, oh, concentration practice, that's all about letting go. So, at least in that person's mind, this absence, absence of anything holding onto. So it's a lot to do about letting go.

But the *Eightfold Path*, the factor of right efforts, is half of it has to do with cultivating the wholesome. And the Buddha of this said that those people who are fully awakened, they live peacefully. They live happily. They live without fear. These are very naturalistic definitions. He's not saying they live in oneness with the cosmos. They experience cosmic consciousness. There's no these big lofty ideals. And naturalistic them is very ordinary. Ordinary, maybe it's difficult or rare, but it's one of the very human characteristics we're talking about here. Peace, happiness, absence of fear.

So those people who are fully awakened are characterized by that. But he also said that by day and night, they are cultivating wholesome states. Yes. Now, he doesn't say whether it's just a natural byproduct of being so free that there's no playing in that state. Naturally, this deep wholeness will keep cultivating, keep growing what is good in us, the wholesome states, the beautiful states that we have. And maybe that's what the orientation just feels so good. It's wonderful to develop these beautiful qualities inside it. So that the path of practice doesn't end with enlightenment it continues we're always practicing we're always being practiced we're always allowing this profound possibility for growing the wholesome to keep working on us keep developing we're always journeying and developing and expanding we're always day and night that's been cultivating.

So non-clinging, not clinging to self, not clinging to possessions, not clinging to opinions, not clinging to stories, not clinging to the past, not clinging to the future, letting go completely does not leave you as a blank slate. It doesn't leave you at a just happy-go-lucky, empty-eye person. We're more than that. We're not just empty. We're the empty space that allows the steeper, profound space of our humanity, the best parts of our humanity, the wholeness of our humanity, to grow and form. Be in the world. And maybe even be a gift to this world that we have. And we live in. And we do it without constructing, making up stories that we cling to. We don't accumulate the bundles of attachments to build ourselves up.

We do it, understanding that it's detrimental to cling. It's detrimental to close down. It's



detrimental to get caught in fear. It's detrimental to get caught in opinions and stories. That doesn't mean that we don't care. Part of this profound aspect of a wholeness that comes from a profound place that's freed up to growth and there's no thinking is in fact a care. The Every Personal Care I know, which means such a wide, wide range of care looks like. So this naturalistic approach to Buddhism is, has a, I would say, a very positive regard for humanity. It sees the human being as a wonderful nothing else but potential for goodness, potential for wholesomeness, like threes and crows from the inside out and that's the possibility that becomes stronger and fuller when more we see the path the empty path of non-climbing the space in which we can walk. May you understand that non-climbing doesn't diminish you. It enhances you. Thank you.