

Wednesday Dharma Talk

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In reading the teachings of the Buddha, there was a remarkable sentence that jumped out at me.

The sentence is, Don't give yourself away. Don't give yourself away. I don't know what exactly that meant in his time, but there are people who abandoned themselves. There are people who give up on themselves. There are people who lose themselves. And if anything, this Buddhist practice is to help us accomplish the opposite, to really be ourselves, to believe in ourselves, to find ourselves.

And it's kind of epitomized for me in this variety of ways in which people are dignified in the ancient teachings. And they don't use the word dignity as far as I know. It's hard to know with ancient language. But it's a hospital that is a couple of blocks from my house. And it's part of a little hospital chain that used to be called Catholic Charities West. Casks Catholic, Noctuary Catholic, Hospitals West, something like that.

And but it was kind of run by, the whole thing was run by nuns, nuns order. Sisters of Mercy. But they had their challenges with Rome and with bishops. So they figured out at some point to kind of separate themselves a bit from the ecclesiastical authority. And they chose a different name for the hospital. And then they became Dignity Health.

And I think that was very carefully chosen. It's almost a political choice. Dignity Health at people. I'm involved in training people to be chaplains. Some of them become hospital chaplains. And one of the, the word chaplain, chaplaincy is, for some, for Buddhists it's a little bit strange, what?

But I have another name for chaplains. They are dignifiers. They go around and they dignify the people they encounter. And the remarkable thing is that there are people in our society who have never had that experience. I knew someone who was in these kind of chaplaincy programs that did a... took inner-city kids who'd never been out of the inner-city camping, like in Sequoias or something like that. And there was one young teenager who went along, and it turned out that it was his birthday that week.

So they celebrated it. And he said, no one had ever celebrated his birthday before. That was the first time. Dignifiers. And I think of Buddhism, is a religion, a message, a teaching that's meant to allow our dignity. The word that the Buddha used when he spoke English is nobility. Nobility.

And... Some of the metaphors he used were metaphors that were meant to be the kind of stories, allegories he used. We were supposed to see ourselves in the allegory. His kings and queens, royalty. Now there of course there's some challenge with the whole notion of royalty and kings and queens, but the idea is this very positive respect, valuing of humanity, human life, And every single one, and these ancient teachings clearly are standing, offering an alternative to the caste system, the kind of racism of the ancient world.

And the interesting way that the Buddha talked about it is that everyone has equal opportunity to live a dignified, honest, good life. And that there's nothing that's distinguishes people biologically in some kind of way to separate out. But we do distinguish ourselves from each other by how we live. Do we live ethically? Do we not? And not to shame anybody, but to emphasize that it's possible for each of us to live a good life, a dignified life, a life where we don't give ourselves away, that we inhabit our life upright.

There were a lot of surprises for me when I started to be a parent and not only raise my own children, but then be around a lot of other small kids. And then I started, as a teacher, boy, I've learned a lot of stories about what people's experience was as kids, what happens to little kids when they're young, sometimes even maybe before they have memories, can shape them for a lifetime. One wonderful story when my son was young was there was... He had a friend. Maybe this isn't so fair to say, but their kids are pretty small, like less than two. And I guess he looked like a thug, this kid.

As much as a two-year-old or one and a half-year-old can look like a thug. But he kind of acted like one, maybe, because he had a custom of hitting and biting other kids. So the parents were kind of alarmed, of course, by this. So they went to a child psychologist who explained that every time he starts doing that, they were to shower him with love. The parents were like, what? I mean, isn't that positive reinforcement?

No, no, no. You have to do it. So they did, and the behavior stopped. And he's been a good kid ever since. And then there's the opposite. There's the ones who didn't get that but got bit hit in return.

And children learn from their parents what it is to be a human being. If parents are always afraid, then they learn there's something to be afraid of in this world. If their parents are

always angry, they learn that anger is okay. If the parents are always angry and aggressive, they learn that's the way to solve the issues. And I could go on and on with a list of things that by osmosis children pick up or are damaged by.

But when watching these children, the young children, especially when they were really young, it was remarkable to see their dignity, their confidence, their aliveness, their vitality, their uprightness, clarity they sometimes had. And of course, sometimes the opposite. But when they know, there was a spark. The story I like to tell is when a friend of ours had a little girl who, she was beginning to speak, so I don't know how old she was, but she didn't have much words, but she could start speaking. So I came to see her and I asked her, who's that? And I pointed to her father.

She said, I don't know, Dad or Daddy or something. And who's that? I pointed to her mom and she said, mommy. And then I pointed to her, who's that? And she said, I am. So I said, no, who are you?

And she said, I am. So I'm really slow. So I asked a third time. And she raised herself up to a big, straight, tall stance for a little girl. two-year-old and she stood up there really like confident and looked at me and she said, I am.

And then I was ready to bow and get down on my knees. You know, and then I said, well boy, I've been, you know, that was unfortunate. For me, I could have messed her up for a lifetime, insisting she had to be someone besides just I am. But this confidence, this kids that have, it's remarkable to see, and it's often lost. It's often squashed. I've known of kids who parents said that, you know, when my kid was maybe three, I spanked the kid from misbehaving. and that personality changed from then on. Never came back to what it was before.

So, don't give yourself away, but it's possible to find yourself. It's possible to become yourself. When I first came to San Francisco Zen Center to practice many years ago, I was one of the most more older, long-term practitioners, priests there, explained to me, that for many people who came to Zen Center to practice, for the first three to five years, they were just finding themselves. And most people left after they found themselves. But it's those people who stayed beyond that who started practicing Buddhism.

It's kind of an extreme thing to say. But I think there's some truth to that, that many people have the task of, you know, in order to, really live the fullness of what this dharma path has to offer. We have to become full, we have to fill with ourselves, be ourselves fully, and discover ourselves, be ourselves, inhabit ourselves fully, with dignity, with value, with importance that we count, that we shouldn't dismiss ourselves, shouldn't underestimate our

value, or be quick to kind of give ourselves away our own value because we feel like we're not worth it, we're not supposed to be a bother for people, and you know, and we don't really count, and so we want to kind of lower ourselves in relationship to other people for all kinds of reasons.

And I think that there may be appropriate times for that, but not when you practice, you sit down to meditate, you're not, there's no one you have to lower yourself below. One of the great trainings in the Zen, what I had there was, the goal there was, one of the goals, you know, we're supposed to have goals, but one of the goals was to be able to meet the teacher as an equal. They called it being Buddha meets Buddha. And that was a wonderful just idea. Really? I was supposed to somehow meet the teacher?

Like just like we're equals and just really, what's that like to meet in a full way and completely be kind of see each other in a dignified way. That was a wonderful koan, it was a wonderful challenge there, because it required me to change. It required me to somehow show up differently rather than coming only to ask questions. And the other person has all the answers. It was like that, I mean that was okay, that was allowed, but that wasn't the goal.

And so when we sit and practice, we encounter one way or the other, we start encountering the ways we've given ourselves away. We start encountering the ways that we have shut down, the ways that we have limit ourselves, the ways that we have been caught in old conditioning that doesn't serve us. Old patterns of always being angry or always being afraid or always blaming or always being disassociated and not connected to what's going on. Or always you know, pleasing the situations around, always making peace. There's the peace-makers who always kind of, but they're not really inhabiting themselves, they're just trying to make themselves safe.

So to develop a kind of self-confidence or self-assurance or growing into oneself, and the paradox of this is that the more fully you can grow into yourself and be yourself in a full embodied way, without the conditionings, without causing harm, without harming yourself, that you become less preoccupied with yourself. It's when somehow the self has been hurt or squashed or challenged that people become very preoccupied with themselves. A good number of people who look very conceited, that's a preoccupation. Something has been harmed and damaged. A good number of people who are excessively shy or timid is another way to be preoccupied with oneself oddly enough. And something has been squashed or damaged.

And so it was lovely, it was really powerful for me when I did Zen practice, because they had a tremendous emphasis on sitting upright. There was a very particular posture, really sitting upright. And Zen has a lot to do with ritual, putting your body in a position that is going to

affect your mind, your heart. One of the things that we did at Zen Center in the monasteries was a lot of bowing. And it's only when I left that I realized that all the many bows we did every day for years, little drop by little drop, it kind of softened my heart.

It kind of provided a sense of reverence for this life and care and preciousness of this moment and now. It was quite a lovely thing. The bow for me, I find the most common thing that it expresses is appreciation. To have this kind of, all these little moments of appreciation through the day, even when you didn't feel appreciative, just the fact that I put my body in this form did something to me, it's got to change something. So the same thing with taking the upright, strong kind of Zen posture. I didn't feel that way for sure. I was kind of timid and I had my lot of self-doubt.

But the posture showed me what it was like to be confident, to be clear, to be pure, fully. I have been told that in AA they have a saying, bring your body and the mind will follow. Well, that works really well for Zen. You know, take a body that represents something and then let everything else kind of adjust accordingly and find itself to show you something that is possible for you to way to be. And so one of the things that is this confidence, self-confidence.

And interestingly, the opposite of confidence is doubt. And the word that's translated as doubt from the ancient language, probably more accurately means indecisiveness, and it's being indecisive or uncertain about something very particular. And there's a lot of things to have doubt about. But the particular thing that the Buddha emphasized, if a person has doubt or uncertainty or indecisiveness, about what is wholesome and what is not wholesome, What is it that's healthy to do? What is not healthy to do?

What is it that's nourishing here, and what is denourishing? To have clarity that to say these words, whatever they might be, those aren't healthy words to speak. For yourself, maybe for others. Other words are healthy. To know that these actions are harmful, and these are not.

To know as you're serving yourself a cookie at lunch. It's okay to have one, but then to spend the rest of the lunch eating there, kind of praying and hoping and strategizing that there's going to be more left, that you can kind of maybe, how many can you take? You know, you start calculating, well, if there's, you know, about 40 people here, and maybe everyone took one, and if there's 20 left left over, that maybe I can take four. And, you know, and so is that a healthy way of thinking? It might be exciting, but is it healthy?

Is that, or are you giving yourself away to greed? Is there actually better things to be doing? And to know there's a better thing to do, to spend time in a wonderful fantasy about

something And I know I've had, when I was a new student, I had fantasies that were involved, fantasies of greatness. I kind of imagined myself doing something great. And that was mostly because I had so much insecurity and lack of that, so it was kind of compensating for it.

But did it serve me well? No. And I learned that it's not useful to have those kinds of fantasies. It's not healthy. there's a healthy to think in other ways. And so they have a clear sense of what is healthy to do, unhealthy, wholesome, not wholesome.

And I love the word wholesome as translates the Pali word *kusala*, sometimes translated as skillful. But I've come to love the word wholesome because the way I kind of my mind, the word play in my mind is that wholesome is what belongs to the whole. and we lose our wholeness all too easily. Children when they're young lose their wholeness. This is a remarkable thing to have seen all these kids in their wholeness, alertness, presence, and then see some of them lose it as they went along in life and were somehow had so many disappointing or difficult experiences.

So what are the things that, what can we do that belongs to the whole? that feeds the whole, that supports the whole, that brings about the whole, rather than those things which are unwholesome, which makes us more divided, more cut off, more separated, more partial. We're only partly here. And I think to some degree we discover through this practice the many ways that we're only partially here, the way that we're resisting or holding back, disconnected from ourselves or over-prioritizing certain kinds of tendencies and thoughts and beliefs and attitudes and desires and aversions.

And to, they limit us, they make us less home. How do we do, how do we, how do we let our whole be here? Our wholeness to come forth. And I think that's one of the purposes of mindfulness, bodyfulness, heartfulness. is to learn how to be at ease, to relax into the body, so that as we relax into it, settle in, that the body kind of has its opportunity, or our inner life has opportunity, to grow and flourish.

When we're tense, any kind of tension means we're partial, means we're cutting off something ourselves. So to sit in a posture, that allows a deep relaxing and opening is quite healing and whole-making. And it's possible to do that in this practice. And a remarkable thing is that it's possible to become whole without becoming healed. It's possible to be so present, so holding it all, that there's even space to hold ways that we still hurt, or ways that we're still wounded, To set up the idea that we have to be healed can be, we have to be fixed.

We have to be better. Can almost be more of the stuff that makes us less whole. And there's this paradoxical way of just accepting all of who we are as part of the whole. This too, this

too, this too, I have to include. We're the wholesome. that recognizing what is healthy and wholesome is the awareness that's able to hold it all, make room for all of who we are.

The good, the bad, and the ugly, in a sense. Not so that we act on all of it, but so we know the whole, and we know how we lose the whole. We know how we lose ourselves, give ourselves away. If some people give themselves away when they get enraged, They give themselves away when they get, you know, collapse into discouragement. Of course we can feel angry, of course we can feel discouraged.

But to lose ourselves with that does not part, whether we lose the whole. And so this marvelous way of just keep opening and allowing, yes, this too is included, this too I have to hold. With either an upright posture that's comfortable, possible, or an inner uprightness, an inner sense of becoming your own dignifier. Unfortunately, we don't have any chaplains here at the IRC, ready to come to your rescue. So you have to do it for yourself.

An inner thing, sit in here and be dignified. Or if you don't like that word, see yourself with profound respect that you're important. and your well-being is very important. So, as a reminder, this talk is part of what we're cultivating. And we're cultivating this sense of wholeness, the sense of dignity, the sense of confidence, so that we're ready, prepared in a wonderful way to not be so self-preoccupied So, not be so caught in the whole drama of self and me, myself and mine.

So we have the opportunity to experience this deep insight of what is called or known as not-self. But not not-self, which is making you kind of weak or unimportant or like sometimes people call it no-self. And people think, I'm supposed to be no self. I'm not supposed to exist. I don't count for anything. Whatever this insight is, it does not involve giving yourself away.

It does not involve diminishing your value, your dignity, your wholeness of who you are. So how to cultivate this? How to cultivate a wholeness? As many of you know, when the Buddha taught mindfulness, he began with mindfulness of the body. And when he taught mindfulness of the body, the first instructions I mentioned this a little bit earlier that he gave, can be summarized in three practices in relationship to the body.

Know the body as you breathe. Relax the whole body as you breathe. No, no, know your body as you're breathing. Feel your body as you're breathing. And then the final thing is relax your body as you're breathing.

It's not very sophisticated. Again, that can't be so important. I mean, there must be much more wonderfully esoteric practices to do than just in my body, just to know it. I mean, give

me a break. I want to experience the great outer reaches of emptiness and cosmic consciousness. My body...

Yes, because the body is equivalent of your meditation home. It's the equivalent of your temple. The body is very, very important. And that's where a lot of the healing and the growth and the wholesomeness will happen. So to sit and to be sitting quietly and breathing in some easy way and to begin knowing what your embodied experience is.

Just getting to know it. In some schools of meditation they teach body scans where you systematically go through your whole body and people get familiar with their body in a very nice way. We don't do it that way. We don't do this systematically, but there's a lot of emphasis on mindfulness of the body in *vipassanā*. But it's a little bit more random. It's like whatever way the body wants to show it to you, that's where you hang out.

That's what you get to know. And then it shifts and changes over time. And eventually you get, you cover everything that needs to be. But to know, to recognize. And the art of it is to know gently, calmly.

To know, to know, oh, there's tightness. To know there's pain. To know this. To know that. But the magic of it is to learn how to know in a way that feels nice for you.

See, can you adjust the act of knowing so it's easy and light? And you look forward to knowing something because it kind of has a nice feeling to just gently, kindly, or maybe sometimes confidently and clearly know warmth, coldness. Know the movements of the chest as you inhale, movement as you exhale. And it might seem simplistic these things, but what we're doing is re-enhancing our body. When we lose ourselves, when we're disconnected, when we divide ourselves and become partial, it more often than not, it involves the disconnection with our body.

And so to begin kind of loving the body back into existence, loving the body into wholeness again. And part of what that helps is to, then you know it, but then the Buddha says, feel it, experience it. And so the, okay, it's one thing to know it cognitively, it's still a little bit removed. Feeling it is to be in it, sensing it, experiencing it from the inside out. Both are important.

So then we're feeling the body, sensing it. And one of the wonderful, fun ways that I practiced *vipassanā* when I was doing this in Burma was I got very curious, whatever was going on, what was happening in my body in relationship to it? So for example, there were tin roofs in the kind of cabin dwelling I lived in. So when it rained, it was really loud. And the monsoon, was astounding.

So I'm just sitting there meditating, minding my own business, not bothering anyone. And like from, you know, I don't know, zero to 60 in half a second or something, the waterfall would fall on the roof. It wasn't just raindrops. It was like cascading waterfalls. You know, it was so phenomenal.

So, I'm sitting there just minding my own business, minding my breath, and crash. And I'd immediately go, what's happening in my body? You know, there'll be a shift in humidity, shift in temperature, shift in something. I was just curious, oh, what's shifted in my body now with all this rain coming down? You know, it was kind of fun to do.

I had these little games. I'd go see my teacher in this room for a practice discussion and... I would say, what's here in this room? Maybe feel it with my body. How does my body sense and feel what's happening?

So what if I had an emotion, which I occasionally did? How does this feel in my body? What's the experience of this emotion? What gets activated? Is it a very particular place?

Is it more suffused through the body in different places? My thinking, I learned to, and especially it works really well when my mind was really caught in thinking. I get, what does it feel like in my body, and like my head usually? And the more active my thinking was, the more likely that there was tension in my thinking muscle, tension in my mind. And I learned so much about how thoughts can have tension, and how thoughts can exist without any tension.

And when there are any tension, they were easy to let go of. When there was tension, it was hard to let go of them. So I learned to kind of then not let go of thoughts, I learned to bring mindfulness to the physical tension or pressure or contraction or tightness or whatever it was at the particular time. So it was always coming to the body. What does it feel like there?

What does it feel like there? And as that happens, the body started to wake up for me. And I started feeling more and more some of the buried emotions that needed to come out. And so I cried, and that was good, finally having to come out. So there was such a relief to sob after I sobbed.

Finally, I felt cleansed. But also, it started to, there was a deeper knowing available in the body. Somehow, a body that's awake... with sensations, awake with awareness, where we're grounded in the body and kind of feel our body, feel our life through our body, as opposed to know our life through our thinking. Rather than navigating and negotiating our life only through our thinking, there's so much more intelligence available when we're centered in our body.

And kind of let the body lead. Let the body show us and teach us what's going on. because then we're operating more from the wholeness of who we are. The paradox, or irony or something, is that people identify so strongly with their thinking that they think that's who they are, that they feel that's who they are, is somehow their thinking, and that's where everything is negotiated. But to take a deeper breath, to let go and settle into the body...

to have a belly that's soft and relaxed, to have the tensions in the arms relax. I learned early in my practice to relax the top of my thighs. And then to allow the knowing, the sensing, not be so cognitive. We have ways, non-verbal ways of knowing that have a lot to do with how all the different ways that we can know and sense and feel operate together. We're so much more creative and intelligent when all of who we are can operate together.

That's not possible if we're preoccupied with our thoughts, our memories, our plans, our hurts, what someone said and how I'm going to reply. To be able to kind of settle back into more the whole of who we are, the fullness of all of it, make room for it, not to get stuck or fixated on any one thing. and to have confidence in that, to discover the natural confidence that's in that way. To go back to this image of, for me, of these small kids who are one, one to two years old, and they could stand and walk and sit upright and see the beauty and the fullness and the clarity and the uprightness and the energy and these bodies, little kids, bodies when that are, all they have on is diapers.

And you can see their muscles, you can see their body, and they're not holding anything yet. They haven't been conditioned by life to be tense or held held, or their body is still in this wonderful natural mode, and this fullness that they can have. It's really inspiring. Some of the most inspiring People that I've seen sitting kind of cross-legged with back straights were probably 14 months old. And we lose so much of that as we grow, and we can regain a lot of it through practices like this.

We gain ourselves, and I think it's more valuable before we get to Saturday when we do this challenging teaching of not-self. I think to kind of get it clear first, we're here to gain yourself first, not to lose yourself. Sometimes they say in spiritual circles you're supposed to lose yourself and discover no self and let go of all me, myself and mine. I don't know if this is not fair to say, maybe you'll forgive me, maybe not. But there was apparently some conference where someone was talking about the not-self teaching in Buddhism.

And these two women were listening to whatever this man was saying. And they leaned over to one, they said, that sounds like a very good religion for men. This not-self thing is overdone, overemphasized. And when it's overemphasized, what we lose is we lose our wholeness. We lose thinking, we're here to gain ourselves too, to gain our life, our lived life, to gain a free

life, a life which is not divided or shut off or been squashed or been dismissed, been shamed, been seen as unworthy.

We're here to be dignified. And maybe as we do so, one of the really fantastic and wonderful things that's possible is we each become more dignified in ourselves. There's more of you. There's more strength in you to dignify others. If you feel have confidence and strength and fullness of being, you show up and you're really fully here.

like that little girl, said, stood up to me in this confident, strong way and said, I am. To be in that way and say, thank you. That thank you carries so much more. To say, I love you, or I appreciate you, or I value you. It's wonderful to meet you.

Whatever it is we know, we offer so much more when there's more of you, that it makes a bigger impact. Maybe it touches people's heart deeper. So we're here in this practice, in this retreat, here in the middle of the retreat, each of us to discover this fullness, this wholeness, this confidence, this aliveness, vitality that's natural. We're not forcing something or pretending. We're returning to something that is inherent to being a human being that maybe we've lost.

So we're in the middle of the retreat, and it's a time to be particularly caring and careful with your practice. There's opportunities now in this kind of environment, this kind of way of practicing, this how you are now, and tomorrow, and maybe the next day especially, to do the reconditioning, to undo some of the old conditioning, to do some of the reconditioning, that it kind of begins to break some of the old frozen patterns, stuck ways, and allow for something deeper to well up and deeper valuing and wholeness as possible.

So be careful here for the next few days, or caring. Maybe caring is a better word than careful. It's a wonderful time, wonderful opportunities. Please stay close, stay close to yourself. Stay close so you can, this inner work can start happening and then unfold.

You have to stay close. You have to feel, you have to be in your body, be connected. And so it's a particularly valuable time to kind of be more inward focused rather than outward focused. So more than, you know, we've said this at the beginning, but even more so now, try not to have, try to leave everyone alone. Let each person do it their own way.

Even something as simple as nodding or smiling, that's a wonderful thing to do, of course. But it can interfere with their own process. You don't know how that's going to be taken in. So if you would be just kind of be the dignifier of everyone. See everyone in good eyes, but really leave them alone.

So everyone does their own work here. So if you have work that might involve talking, Try

to keep it really to a minimum, only functional, you know, what the work itself. Try to really, let's really settle here, be quiet here, because each of you is worth it. Each of you is worth it for us to see the fullness of what's in you. Come forth and be here.

Come alive here. May you become fully yourself. And then tomorrow... You only have 23 hours to do it, because tomorrow we start with the insights. So let's sit for a couple of minutes.

---KEYWORDS--- Buddha, nobility, caste system, Zen Center, Buddha meets Buddha, vipas-sanā, kusala, mindfulness of the body, not-self, dignity