

Saturday Dharma talk

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I have a friend who, many years ago, called up the San Francisco Zen Center to go there and be a guest for a while. They have accommodations where someone can rent a room and be kind of a guest, kind of like a hotel almost, but you get to do it at a Zen center. And I think she wanted a little private retreat time.

So she called up the office, which is back when the only way was through telephone. There was such a time. And the office person said, “Oh, great, the guest manager will call you back.” Or no, I don’t know what it was. “The guest manager is not here. You know, he’ll be here later.”

So my friend called later, and the person answered the phone and said, “Well, Robert’s not here.” And so, after these two attempts, my friend said, “I think this means that I wasn’t meant to come to Zen Center.” And the person at Zen Center said, “No, I think it means that Robert’s not here.”

So the contrast between these two approaches to life are huge. One interprets, makes a story out of the thing, and has a kind of, maybe almost, supernatural idea of cause and effect and destiny and what’s supposed to be. It can get pretty elaborate, what people live by. And then, in a kind of classic Zen style, not to do that. Just meet and deal with what’s right in front of you, what’s right here. It just means Robert’s not here. That’s all.

And so, in this *vipassanā* practice, we’re in that school, like Zen Center. *Samādhi* is not here. That’s all it means. I didn’t get very calm today. What does that mean? I’m a failure as a meditator. I’m not meant to be here. I should have chosen to go windsurfing off the coast of San Diego.

You know, we make these stories. It should have been, you know, to interpret it, and it can get quite elaborate. I wouldn’t be surprised if one or two of you have suffered today because

of the syndrome, this movement of something's happening and we make a story out of it. We apply meaning to it.

And I'm not saying making meaning is wrong, necessarily, but it's all too easy to suffer because of it. And what we're learning to do in *vipassanā* is just, "Oh, look at that. Isn't that amazing? I didn't get concentrated today." Well, look at that. My mind was out of control today. But that means I didn't try hard enough. This is the wrong retreat for me. I had too much for lunch.

We make all these stories to explain it. We want cause and effect. And if we don't see it directly, humans will often make up things. But here, keep it really simple. My mind was thinking a lot today. I was tired today. Maybe there's no need to add meaning to it.

And one of the reasons why that's useful for *vipassanā* practice is that the meaning-making mind is a distraction from doing something much more important. And that is, what is your relationship? Seeing very clearly, what's your relationship to what you're knowing? And can that relationship be one where you find freedom, where you find love, compassion? Can you have a simple, direct relationship with what's happening?

That is, that feels good. Look at that. My mind was not concentrated today. If I look at it at first, there was actually no problem with it. But then I interpreted it. I made meaning out of it. And the meaning is where the suffering started.

The meaning was that any self-respecting meditator is supposed to go from zero to 60 in five seconds, and I didn't get concentrated in 65 seconds. In fact, five hours was not enough. Therefore, that means, that means, that means. Rather, instead, today there was no concentration. I found that interesting, and I thought, "Oh, I guess this is how it is now. Robert's not here, I'm not concentrated, and I was okay with it."

I didn't look at that today. It was a miracle. I didn't make it a story. I didn't make it about me. I didn't make anything of it. I just—it's like, you know, you walk down the path here and you notice there was gravel, and there was no story about the gravel, nothing else about it. It's just gravel.

Maybe it was even interesting gravel. "Oh, look at that. I don't get to walk on gravel that often. It feels kind of crunchy. I'm glad I'm not barefoot." But I just didn't do much about it. The gravel, just the gravel. What if your concentration is that way? Just an unconcentrated mind.

And then, in that simplicity of just this, that's where the miracle of mindfulness is. It's not like a dull, boring kind of accepting the present moment with just, like, because you're supposed

to, and not do anything with it, and, you know, just being depressed about it. It's actually where you begin finding a healthy relationship, an alternative. Someplace where you see it directly, you know it as it is, and you see your relationship to it.

You see that you have your for and against it. You're rejecting it or you're accepting it. You want it different. You want to keep it this way. Look what I do. I make it all about me.

It's a story about me. I'm the central character in this story about the person who's not getting concentrated in it. I'm way behind everybody else, and I'm an embarrassment to the Buddhist world. I hope they don't know this. Certainly, they'll kick me out.

When I was at the Zen monastery, I'd never been there before. I went to a three-month retreat, and it seemed like a very serious place. It was January, it was winter, and you were supposed to be at every meditation session. They had people who took records, made sure you were there, and if you weren't there, they'd go find you.

So, you know, you had to be there. And you had to be there at a particular time. You couldn't just wander in late and no one would care. I mean, there you had to. They'd just close the door if you weren't there. You couldn't get in.

So anyway, I was happy to be there. And I don't know how many weeks into being there, maybe it was three weeks, I overslept. And when I woke up, I was late to go to that first sitting. So I couldn't go in anymore. So it meant I'd missed the whole thing.

And so there were all these stories in my mind: what that meant, what people were doing, what was going to happen to me. So I went down there and sat, meditated outside the door, waiting for it to open, to be right there for the first chance I had to go in. And I was convinced all day that someone was going to come and tell me, "You have to leave. You have to leave. You just ruined the contract for being at the monastery, and out you go."

I was going to be rejected from the monastery. I was completely sure that I had really blown it. And, to my amazement, I went through the whole day, went to bed at night, and no one said anything to me about it. So it was kind of amazing to see, so clearly, the whole story-making mind and what I built about it, and how big it became, loomed in my mind.

Wow. And supposed to—well, I overslept. I guess that means that I can't go to the first sitting. I guess that means I'll sit outside and wait for the next sitting. Just okay. Something might happen. Maybe someone wants to talk to me, but we'll see what. And just right there, find ease. Find just being with it as it is there.

So I'm going on like this because this approach represents the very naturalistic way that the

Buddhist teachings are taught in the early tradition, and the very naturalistic way that we can go about the *vipassanā* practice. We can learn how to just be present for the way things are, and in doing that, begin discovering what our relationship to it is. Do we have stories? And do we think the stories are 100% true?

And we're living in the stories and letting them shape us and affect our emotional life. And do we live in the stories? Or do we see, "Well, I came late for the meditation. Look at that. I have a story. I'm aware. I have a story that they're going to kick me out."

That's interesting that my mind should have that story. I have no idea if it's a true story. I don't have to know if it's true. It's just something my mind thought. And maybe I'll be ready if they do, but hold it lightly.

So in that scenario, I wouldn't be latching on to the story. I wouldn't be believing it. I wouldn't be stuck in it. I wouldn't be burdened by it. I would just see it as a story.

Or maybe even better, maybe I wouldn't even make a story to begin with. It's just, "I'm late." And I might have a thought, "I'm late. I wonder what stories other people are going to have." That might be interesting to discover. And apparently, no one had any stories about it. No one noticed me.

So, this ability to see, what is that relationship? And so part of this directly seeing the present is seeing, "Look at that. There's aversion," or, "There is no aversion about something." There is fear, and now the fear is not there. There is desire, there's greed. "Oh, that's not going away so easily. But it's there. It's greed."

Well, it's not going away. That means— as soon as you start a sentence with, "That means," I usually don't say it as a sentence, but if you do the equivalent, "That means," always remember: at the end of the sentence, put a really big question mark. But is that really true? That was just a sign of meaning. Is that really?

So in *vipassanā* practice, this is at the heart of it, I think, in early Buddhism: to be present enough to see how we're relating to things. And to begin recognizing when our relationships to whatever is happening in the moment are healthy for us and not healthy for us. When it's stressful for us or not stressful for us. When it's stressful or when it's nourishing for us, even better than not stressful. When it betters us, we become a better person because of it.

Or it feels like, "Ouch, I think this is a rather awkward situation. I hope—you know, I don't really feel kind of yucky." Yucky is maybe a very important realization. "Wow, that was yucky to lie to my best friend." That's considered very good, to know it's yucky. To have enough inner conscience to see the difference of what is socially very harmful and to recognize it.

So what I'm trying to do here is convey to you the simplicity, the naturalness of what mindfulness can be and what Buddhist practice can be. And so, to say these simple stories of my friend calling up Zen Center or sleeping in at Tassajara, it kind of makes it maybe understandable. But to take this as far as possible, to really understand this really deeply and allow yourself to get still enough and quiet enough to really let it penetrate down into the foundation of how you operate in this world, is an amazing process of transformation.

And so, you know, I use very simple, ordinary examples, but it's not—once you understand it, then start applying it, start appreciating it. It goes deeper and deeper and deeper. So, to give you an example, I want to now talk some more about this early Buddhist tradition and this word *dhamma*, which can mean nature, could also mean the teachings of the Buddha. It could also mean the natural processes that come into play as we do the practice.

So, in the liturgy of Theravāda Buddhist monastics, pretty much every day in the monastery, they chant five qualities of the *Dhamma*. And they begin with this expression, “the well-taught *Dhamma*.” The *Dhamma* is well taught by the Buddha. And then it has five qualities to describe this well-taught *Dhamma* of the Buddha.

And it's a remarkable list of characteristics. And so some of you might think that in order to really understand the *Dhamma*, you need to get a PhD in Buddhism. That's what it takes. Thank you. You better get to work. It's sophisticated, profound, and there's 54 types of emptiness, and you better, you know, parse them all apart until you really understand these profound teachings.

But there are people who get PhDs in Buddhism who have a lot of authority about what Buddhism is. Boy, it's amazing. And with great authority they say, “That's not how you learn what Buddhism is. That's not where you go to learn. You learn it here in yourself. You learn it in the simplicity of what the Buddha is talking about.”

So the well-taught *Dhamma* of the Buddha has these five characteristics that I think we're meant to find in ourselves, or find present here and now. And the first one is what I said yesterday, *sandiṭṭhiko*, and I translated it here as, “It is visible here and now.” The second is that it's immediate. Sometimes it's translated as timeless, but I think that just gets confusing, because timeless kind of starts morphing close to the idea of eternity.

And now we have ideas of no birth and death and beyond everything. And it gets kind of metaphysical, mystical, when you use the word timeless. But literally, the word in Pāli is “not of time.” And its ordinary meaning in Pāli means immediate. So, *Dhamma* is visible here and now. It's immediate. It's right here in the immediate moment.

It's not a complicated thing. Seven years of PhD program? No. And then the next one is really fun, because the Pāli is a colloquial expression that is kind of like someone saying something to someone else. And it kind of says, like if I was going to say the words to you, I'd say, "Hey, hey, come and see. Hey, come and see here." So some people translate it as inviting inspection, inviting you to come to see for yourself.

Ehipassiko. So here, *ehi* is "come," *passiko*, "see": come and see here. So it's also pointing, like the first word visible, to something you can see right here. And I love the idea that it's an invitation.

And in Chinese Buddhism, the Chinese had a really hard time really understanding Buddhism because they thought all the Buddhist texts they were getting from India were all part of the same system of Buddhism, and they had to understand all of them. You know, thousands and thousands of texts from lots of different periods of time. And so they did a really big job, some of these Buddhist scholars, to survey it all and understand it all.

And there was one teacher named Fǎzàng, who's a great scholar, did a phenomenal study of all these Indian texts. And he wrote a big fat book on Buddhism to explain it all. And right in the middle of the book, he explains the core of Buddhism. So this is like, pay attention now. I mean, this is a phenomenal enterprise of the Chinese, really, for hundreds of years studying Buddhism.

The culmination was Fǎzàng and his book. And the whole book is like serious scholarship. But all you have to do is go right to the right page, the right line, and the core is right there. And this is what it is: "Liberation beckons you in the middle of everything." That's it. Come and see. Come and look.

So the Pāli is kind of just simple. They don't say why. Come and look. Right here is your liberation. Right here is your freedom. Here.

And then the next, though: visible here and now, immediate, inviting inspection right here. Come and look at it. And the fourth one is onward leading. And I love this idea that nothing is static. The core teaching in Buddhism is that, sometimes, in some schools of Buddhism, everything is impermanent, everything is changing.

So that might be so. But the corollary of that is that, yes, things change. Things are impermanent, become other than they are. But the way they become other than they are has a lawful pattern. The change is based on the cause and conditions that are at play. And if certain conditions are in place, certain things will happen.

I've been nearby here. There are some beautiful lakes. I went camping there with my family

once. I loved to get up early in the morning. I still remember some of the feelings of peace I felt, looking out across some of these lakes early, early in the morning, and everything was still.

Everything was quiet and peaceful. The mountains were not moving, and there were no clouds. There were no animals awake yet. It was beginning of dawn, and the surface of the water was just so calm. And then the breeze picked up, and then there were ripples in the water, and then there were more.

And at some point the clouds came in. Things change, and the quality and the surface of the water starts changing, and the color changes. And it changes because of the conditions. So for your life, your life is also constantly changing. And you have some role to play about how it changes.

If you just think that lying is the best thing going, then the best lies should be saved for your best friends. And you just can't wait to be with your friends, because you've been developing your lies and really refined them well, and they kind of have zingers. And it makes you happy to feel them, you know, they feel ouch. I mean, you're creating conditions for yourself that are going to be pretty awful. You're creating social conditions that are going to come back and bite you.

Your friends are not going to want to be friends anymore. If they find out, they're going to be upset and deeply hurt. But you're also beginning, you're kind of twisting and shaping your quality of your heart this way. You're probably closing it down to really be empathic with other people. It's moving you in a whole direction that is not too healthy.

If instead, you wake up in the morning and say, "Today's the day. I'm going to be as honest as I can. And I'm going to be careful how I'm honest, because I've heard you could hurt people with honesty. I'm going to be honest and see if I can do it in a way that just makes my friends happy and delighted, and they trust me more."

So, two choices. Your choice, or you can do nothing, not choose one or the other. Maybe your day is okay, but maybe you missed an opportunity to cultivate the goodness, cultivate the good qualities, and the happiness and good relationships that come with being honest.

So, the cause and conditions of our life, the onward leading, is something that's deeply embedded in this life of ours. We're always changing, always shifting, and we have some role for contributing to how it might change by putting in place certain healthy conditions. Living ethically, living honestly, living with compassion in our presence, practicing. There are a lot of things we can do that are healthy, good things, that begin changing our life in important

ways.

And I'm so lucky, I feel, to have been a *Dhamma* teacher for so long, to watch people change, to watch people grow and open up and develop wonderful confidence, wonderful ease, wonderful peace, wonderful stability, wonderful capacities to be present and to communicate honestly, wonderful growth in compassion and care and generosity. It's just kind of pretty cool to watch how people can change and grow.

So the *Dhamma* is onward leading. And some of that onward leading is not because we choose to do it or we try to change ourselves. There's something deeply inherent in when we show up really honestly for ourselves, just to see it and hold it clearly. What we're doing then is we're not contributing the unhealthy things.

We don't have to necessarily contribute the healthy things. But what mindfulness does, the spaciousness, the openness, the presence we bring to whatever is going on, creates room for the natural process of unfolding to happen. And this onward leading has a lot to do with the natural unfolding and the natural growth inside. That doesn't have to be so intentional even.

And it's remarkable that as human beings, many of us seem to have a natural capacity to grow in kindness, to grow in freedom, to grow in wisdom, to grow in kindness. Not because we want to, but because it's the nature of the practice that, as we open up, as we—when I was doing Zen practice, I thought of the practice at some point as like a meat tenderizer for the heart.

And as my heart was getting softer and softer, like the crust, I guess—I don't know what this would mean, but that they need to be tenderized—but the hardness, the crust or something, was dissolving. And so I was just much more sensitive to the world. And that made all the difference. In that sensitivity, I kind of naturally didn't want to lie and steal and hurt people. I wanted to do the opposite.

So, onward leading. And I believe that sometimes in practice, it's quite inspiring to be sensitive enough, not caught in stories, not making meaning, not reacting to things so much, but kind of listening or sensing deeply, being present fully, and beginning to sense and feel, "Yes, there's an onward-leading movement here. Oh, here's where the onward-leading movement is. This is where the growth is."

If I put my attention right here, keep it there, with the breathing in this spot, I can feel something wants to grow. Something's here. This is the way forward. This is where the settling happens. This is where something opens. Yes.

And of course, you have to be careful not then to have greed for it, or start engineering to make it happen. It's enough just to feel it and stay close to it, and let the process unfold by itself. This is particularly true with concentration. This would be getting deeper in concentration. That, "Oh, this is where the concentration is. This is the onward leading."

It's also true sometimes with peace, with a deep sense of ease. "Oh, this is the direction. This is where the onward leading lies. Oh, yes, stay here. This is where the peace will open. Stay here." No, no, no, no. I think Amazon's having sales. And I just need to go and check the sales. I don't want to miss the sales.

No, no, no. Wait a minute, wait a minute. Check the sales? Things I don't even know I needed? How do I stay with the peace? Stay here, stay here.

I think it's Joseph Goldstein who tells the story of sitting in meditation in what feels like the brink of enlightenment. Like it's about to happen, something's about to happen. And then the lunch bell rings. Well, well, enlightenment or lunch. I had a feeling he went through lunch.

So, it's onward leading. And then the final quality of the *Dhamma* is that it is to be personally realized by the wise. So it's kind of implying that you're wise. It's for you, wise people, to personally discover this, know this, realize this for yourself.

Then it's onward leading to be really present for what's visible here and now. Literally, but also figuratively, just really be present for the direct experience, and keep it really simple. And kind of see it in the immediacy of now. The movement of the *vipassanā* practice is into greater and greater immediacy.

So at some point, past and future get smaller, weaker, thinner. And after a while, the past and future are not really relevant anymore. You still have a past and the future. You're not betraying it. But it's so wonderful to get into the simplicity of the immediacy of practice.

So that's a movement. And so, rather than just going like that and just being completely in the present moment and immediate present, it's a gradual process. Every movement away from the present, from the immediacy of now, becomes weaker and thinner and less captivating, less pulling us. And we come here, we settle, we settle, we settle, to just here, just now, right now, here.

And right here, this onward leading is related to this idea that something's beckoning us. Here. Come right here. Pay attention here. This is where it's good to be with the attention. And then it's onward leading and personally realized by the wise.

So in these ancient texts, someone asks the Buddha, “Well, can you explain this? How is it that we can know the *Dhamma* in this way?” And in a variety of ways, in different places, the Buddha said, to paraphrase it, “You should know that you have attachments, and you should know that the attachment is no longer there.”

If you know those two things together, right there, you see something that’s visible here and now. Right now, it’s immediate that you see this. Right now, it’s inviting you to look more deeply at what just happened, and look more deeply at this absence of attachment. And here, in this absence of attachment, this is where the onward leading is, that we’re going to experience for ourselves.

Some of the attachments that he named were greed, hate, and delusion. If you have greed, or hatred, and delusion, and then you see them disappear and they’re not there, right there you’re seeing the *Dhamma* in a profound way. What stands out to me is that this is not 54 types of emptiness. This is not great philosophies, metaphysical philosophies about the nature of reality. It’s not stories about future lives, past lives.

It’s something about just right here, right now, simple, in a certain kind of way, very ordinary. Rather than thinking you have to get deep, deep states of *samādhī*, concentration, blissed out, floating in a cloud of empty consciousness, the Buddha here, when he’s talking about really the heart of the *Dhamma*, he’s pointing to something very natural for human beings that we can all experience for ourselves.

We can recognize when we’re caught with attachment of greed, hatred, delusion. In the other place, he has 16 lists of things that he says in the same way, that you see when they’re present and after absence. Things like envy, jealousy, and conceit. And I can’t remember offhand all 16.

But the point being that this is something simple, psychological, not metaphysical, not supernatural, very natural. It’s part of our inner nature that we’re getting to know. And are there ways that being here at Deep Springs, with this wonderful outer nature, can make it easier for you to have a simplicity of being? The busyness of life, the preoccupations of world and society and work and complicated relationships can kind of be invited here to recede into the background.

In favor of just enjoying the simplicity of these trees that stand here so peacefully and quietly, without making any stories. There’s something very peaceful about a tree, about a plant, something very beautiful about the water here and the flow, and the times we hear the flowing creeks and springs. That can invite us into a simplicity of being, not just to be

simple-minded, but rather to help highlight for us when there is greed, when there's hatred, when we get attached, when we start making a story, when we start making meaning that's not needed to be made.

And then, so look at that. And then coming back to the simplicity without it. Look at that. I was going in a direction that was going to cause suffering, or did cause some suffering, something that wasn't going to serve me. And right there, I could see the absence of that.

Not picking it up, not getting involved, letting it be. Right there, in that, seeing that distinction, seeing there, you're at the front-row seat of seeing the *Dhamma*. If you do it well, that's where your PhD will be. Right there, in that simplicity of seeing such an ordinary, simple thing.

And I want to emphasize this because it might seem unbelievably simple. It's certainly a self-respecting world religion like Buddhism has to have much more sophisticated things to say. That something is so simple, psychological, so simple to understand? No, you've got to be kidding. I'm not. I'm not kidding.

So, to trust this process of practicing here, being here, to trust even when it's difficult, that you're not being asked to believe anything, you're not being asked to adopt worldviews that are not your own. You're asked to—you're invited to settle into here and now, enter into the fullness, three-dimensional fullness, of the immediacy of now. So something in your mind can clear and settle enough. The conversation settles, the stories mind settles, the meaning-making settles, the desiring mind that keeps us in stories and hindrances.

We start trusting a simplicity of being when we're walking on the trails, eating our food, sitting in the meditation hall, laying down to sleep at night. All these opportunities, so that we get closer and closer, but resting in that place where we're in the immediacy of now. What's visible here and now, what's immediate, what's inviting inspection, what is onward leading, and what is personally to be realized by the wise, which means you. Isn't that a positive idea?

So, thank you for today and your practice. I know the first day is difficult. And what you're doing here is really worth it, really invaluable. And I hope that you trust this process you're here, not because I tell you to, but because there's a way that trusting this practice is the same as having a deep trust in yourself.

That you can return to yourself in a deep way, almost like come home to yourself, and trust that's good, so that this whole process can unfold for you. Okay. So thank you.