

Sunday Dharma Talk

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We are out here in the wild Sierras. It can seem pretty pastorally nice here, and you know that everything here is like *The Sound of Music* or something. And so there are rattlesnakes, and as Shauna said, first aid. It's pretty rare to get bitten by a rattlesnake unless you're really almost making an effort. But you should respect them.

And the other is bears, so you should assume that there are bears in this area. There have been bear events and sightings, and especially, they like food. They like honey, and so if there's a partially open door and food inside, they think it's theirs, like an offering. So of course they'll come in to get it.

So just be really careful with your car, where you leave food outside, or if you're in a tent. You shouldn't have any food in the tent because that's also just like an invitation. They feel so lucky. It's their land; they live searching what's available in their land. So why wouldn't it be theirs?

So here we are. And perhaps, after now we've been here maybe forty-eight hours, forty, fifty-two hours, maybe—I don't know quite how long—fifty-six hours, maybe by now you're beginning to get hints of some kind of inner change. Maybe you're a little bit calmer, maybe a little bit more subtle, maybe you have a little heightened sensitivity to what's going on in you: your feelings, your emotions, your thoughts. There might be things that you normally don't address, only kept at bay or kept distracted from.

Now something is bubbling up. Maybe it feels important. Maybe it feels like a personal challenge. Maybe it's a personal joy, a feeling of coming home to yourself, or a feeling that this is good, to feel this way—not so stressed, not so caught up. So maybe there are hints of that beginning to happen, and we are looking for, we are encouraging here, a process of change.

If we weren't encouraging the process of change, that's okay, because you're going to change anyway. But if you leave it to chance how you change, it might not be the best influence that influences your change. So, you know, outside of here, if you spend a lot of time with people who are angry or agitated, afraid, it's easy to kind of pick it up. You spend enough time with that.

If you spend time with people who are kind, you might start kind of taking that in, and that becomes a little bit part of the atmosphere and all that. The Buddha said that if you want to be calm, the food, the nourishment for calm, is calm. So it's a little odd, but go find a calm person to be with. Go to a calm place if you feel you need to be calm.

Take it in, imbibe it, kind of let it be a nourishment, let it be an influence on you. If you are dealing with fear and trying to find a way not to be afraid, and someone asks you if you'll go with them to a horror movie, well, you know, you can't refuse if it's your friend. Then you don't sleep for three days. It probably wasn't a good choice.

We can be deeply influenced by what's around us. But what we're looking for here, in a certain way, in a wonderful way, is that as we cultivate greater mindfulness, greater awareness, greater presence, the things of the world, when they impact us, they don't stick. They maybe go through us, or they are shed, or there's nothing here that they're influenced by. But what that requires is to be grounded in yourself.

And today, there's emphasis on the body. It's part of a process of grounding. To be the body is like—the Buddha called your body the world. That's a pretty big name for your body. Your personal world, all of it, is found right here in this body.

And many of us spend much of our time thinking about things beyond ourselves, into the future, into the past, in other places, other times, things that we want, things we don't want, things that we're afraid of that are not really present. This movement outward into the world and thinking that's where the solution is—and of course it has to be out there because that's where the problem is. And so we're kind of struggling with the tremendous challenges that are involved in being a human being.

I don't want to make light of how difficult it is to survive sometimes, and find our safety, and kind of manage in this sometimes complicated social world that we live in. A world of birth and death, plenty of tragedies. But there's a way that it influences us more deeply in a negative way. If we're not present for ourselves for that influence, we're so outwardly focused we don't even notice.

In some deep inner way, that moment of contact, that moment in which we're taking it in,

and how we absorb it, or we latch onto it, or something inside of us gets awoken by it, triggered by it, and it just kind of festers and lives there. Maybe it feels uncomfortable. Personal discomfort, if it's a normal kind of course of living, is a trigger to look out in the world. Who's to blame?

What's the problem out there? What has to be fixed out there so that I can be fine, I can be okay? And what we're learning by being grounded in ourselves, settled in ourselves, we're learning the art and the craft of monitoring ourselves, managing ourselves, understanding ourselves, being present. Not just in an abstract way, but really present at the moment of contact, at the moment we meet the world or the world comes to us.

So that we have some ability to manage, or maneuver, or flow with all the things that come that are going to influence us. We want to be conscious about it, because then there's a fair chance that it won't stick. There's a chance it won't build, continue to develop in some kind of way that is hard for us.

I think there's a fair amount of people who have trouble with this Buddhist English word "suffering." And part of the challenge with it is that suffering sometimes is so big we can't get a handle on it. We don't know the way in. Like, where's the solution?

It's all these things. It's this big bundle, phenomenal. The Buddha called it one big, huge bundle. In one metaphor, he talked about a big tangle ball of yarn that you just can't kind of find out how to untangle. And so it just seems so solid.

But if we can be grounded in ourselves, settled here, and aware as the world comes to us—as someone says something, as there's a sound, as the weather changes, and all kinds of things—we have a chance right there to see something coming in, and how we react to it, and respond to it, how we meet it. And it isn't so much that it's the world that's responsible for how we end up. Rather, the world presents us with stuff, and how we receive it, how we pick it up, how we react to it, how we latch onto it, how we close down around it—it's the inner response to it that builds up the complicated tangle of yarn.

So we sit here, being very present, to begin understanding the dynamics, understanding the process of how we are influenced, how we change, for the better and for the worse. So we can choose for the better. We can allow for something nice to happen. And that's a phenomenal, powerful thing to begin tracking for yourself and see for yourself.

Oh, this is how it works. This is how the game is played. This is how I'm influenced and changed. And this is what I can do about it. This is how I can shift and change and meet it and be mindful and stay present.

Find that place that's neither accepting nor rejecting. Find that place that's not for or against. Find that place where there's not reacting. Where you don't have to necessarily do anything about it, but leave it alone. And in that way, things begin to shift.

One of the big shifts is that maybe you won't care for my language exactly, but maybe you can choose alternative words that are comfortable. Well, you're no longer a victim. Victimhood is overrated, and people often take things in as if, "Oh, poor me," or, "This is what, you know—I mean, it's being done to me, and I'm living under this burden."

Then there is also the idea of responsibility. Like, I have to do it. It's up to me. I have to fix the problem. I have to take care of things.

I have to be assertive. I have to do, do, do. And so we're, you know, kind of moving into the world. Sometimes there's the idea that if you're not going to be the victim, you have to be the asserter, the one who takes care of themselves and forges their own path and moves ahead, because no one else is going to do it for you. And so the victims fall to the left and to the right as you go through the world.

People get harmed. The idea is these are all ideas which are not needed. These are ideas where we lock into some kind of construct, some kind of idea of who we are and what we need to have. And so we start seeing, when we can stay quiet enough and still enough, and be present for the moment of contact, the moment that something is said, something occurs, a sensation in the body, a thought, a feeling, an event around us, and see how it comes to us.

And what is the response? What is our relationship to it? Do we tighten up, or do we open up? Do we pull away, or do we stay present? And start seeing what the differences are.

Not that you have to be one way or the other. What we're trying to do is, for ourselves, begin seeing what is, what happens, what's going on here. How does this work for me? And why is it I respond this way, or is this the only way I can respond?

Do I need to respond this way? Might be there's some other way. And to answer those questions for yourself, it really helps a lot if you're no longer outwardly focused, if you're looking for the solution in the world, the solution in the world around you. And it helps a lot if you don't put the burden of you being the one who's going to fix everything.

That you're already lost the game if it is all up to you. But if you learn to be present right when life begins, where it occurs in the present moment, you start learning different ways of being, different ways of relating, and that you have different choices. Sometimes, if you don't make

a choice, you go along automatically in the automatic operating systems that you have. But maybe you have a choice to operate from very different operating systems.

So, very recently, I read a—well, if I describe it too much, you’re going to not be interested. But just to get your attention, maybe it was written by a Zen teacher, Zen priest. So that maybe is a little interesting. But then maybe what’s not so interesting is that he’s a software engineer specializing in AI.

But he used his AI to analyze the *Pāli Canon*. And what he found was the most common regular word, not like a preposition or a word like “and,” in the *Pāli Canon*, is the word *bhikkhu*, which means monk. It makes sense because the Buddha is often teaching to the monks, and he would address the monks. The second most common word is *dhamma*.

So that kind of makes sense. The fourth most common word in all those texts is the word “birth.” Birth, to be born. Why is that word there? The fourth most common word in this whole canon of sacred scripture is birth.

What about suffering? I thought that’s what Buddhists were all about—suffering. Shouldn’t that end up at number one? I think he did the hundred most common words, and I don’t think *dukkha* was in there, but birth was number four.

Talk about nature. Talk about a metaphor or a word that talks about natural functioning of a human being, biological functioning. Why would he be—why was the Buddha interested? But he was celibate after all. What was it, you know, what’s this about?

It’s a metaphor for how we can grow in the *Dhamma*. Things get born in us, and over and over again, he’s talking about how things get born in us. The contrast to that in the *suttas* is how things are constructed in us. And for the Buddha, basically constructs, he usually saw as not a helpful thing.

What gets born in us is really helpful and healthy, and the idea is to find a way to have a presence, attention, that allows what is healthy to be born and to grow. There’s a lot of language in the *suttas* about—again, it’s not the language of construction. It’s not a language of—some people use the word fabrication for it. This word, *saṅkhāra*.

A friend of mine, who’s a Buddhist teacher, likes to call it concoctions. In the more polite Buddhist English, they say formations. But that’s almost too polite. It’s too broad. But I like constructions.

Some fabrications. It’s good. And this is the way the mind, as I’ve been talking about a little bit, lives in stories and ideas it can create. We’re quite capable of making things up. So

another way I translate *saṅkhāra* is what's made up.

And of course none of you, but there are occasionally by accident people who make things up, and they make up things that don't even exist. I mean, I've done that. You know, my friend said he was going to do something. And he didn't do it.

He didn't come. He was late. He didn't come at all for the meeting, or didn't do anything he said he would do. And I make up a story of what that means. And, you know, it's not always a polite story.

You know, it's like—you know—I won't try to—I won't give you the bad news of the stories I might make up, but, you know, enough to get angry. And then finally, I'm contacted by my friend, and they explain what happened. Nothing to do with my fabrication. Zero.

And I believed myself. I made something up and believed it. And was living in that, and I was being influenced by that, and getting all hot because of it. I wasn't present. I wasn't being careful.

I wasn't seeing and recognizing that, oh, this is: my friend didn't come, and here is my interpretation of why. Now, let's put a question mark after that interpretation, and let's wait and see. So we're quite capable of making things up, and we make up things a lot. And this is one of the great emphases of the Buddha, is how much people are making things up in their mind: *saṅkhāras*, constructs.

But he offers this alternative, and that is those thoughts, even stories, our creativity, our intelligence, our deep capacity for contemplation and reflection, our deep capacity to ask profound questions of our life, our deep capacity to be aware and sensitive to what's going on here—this is something that gets born. And literally, the Buddha says it's born in the womb. Now, some of us don't have wombs, so we're out of luck, unless you understand it to be a metaphor.

The source of life that we all have within us, the source of the kind of lived life, we have this deep source. And many ways in which *Theravāda* Buddhism has been taught down through the last decades or centuries, it seems to be almost like life is really bad, and we should get out of it. But for the Buddha, there's something really good here. There's something marvelous here. There's something healthy here.

Yes, the constructs are bad, are painful, are suffering. But not what gets born and grows in us. That can be really good. The construct is what creates some of these horrible emotions and attitudes and impulses that people have that cause so much harm in the world.

And then later in our tradition, this idea of mental constructs, mental formations, came to be understood as all thoughts and ideas and mental activities we have. But in the time of the Buddha, it was not that. There were two kinds of mental activities: mental birth of ideas and thoughts and feelings and impulses. There was that which was made up in the made-up mind, the operating system of fantasy, and then there's those that are born from this deeper source.

So this ability to stay grounded and sensitive, the way the instructions were this morning, to really sense into and feel the body in a deep way, is an access point to be able to feel that deeper source within us. It's not something that you could think your way into. It's something you feel your way into. It's something that you make room for. It's something you allow for.

It's something that you shine the sunlight of awareness on. Some things grow in the light. Some things don't require sunlight. Maybe artificial light is fine for someone who's going to build a weapon, or that's just something that weapons generally are part of the constructed mind.

Some of these weapons that are being used in the world right now have never existed ever before, just in the last decades. They don't require sunlight. They require human ingenuity, making it up. You know, the complicated world of design and construction.

But to create a world where there's love, where there's care, where there's a long-term happiness for people, where we don't live in conflict and fight but live in cooperation or care, that requires something very different than the made-up world. And the difficult news is that what it requires of you is to find that way to come from the source inside. Come within. Things get born from deep inside.

So I want to give you two different teachings that talk about what can come from these two different sides, two different operating systems. One of them is fairly common in the insight world. It's the teaching on the *five hindrances*. Anybody who's going to be a regular insight practitioner should memorize the *five hindrances*.

There are often talks given about them. And the hindrances can be difficult to deal with. They're very powerful sometimes, and we get caught in them. So the hindrances are:

- The first one is desire, craving, sensual desire.
- The second is ill will, hatred.
- The third is two things put together, and it's usually called sloth and torpor. But one of the words, I think the first one, can also mean rigidity. So the way we get rigid, we

get tight, we freeze, we get shut down. So it's not just ordinary sloth and torpor; it's a whole different kind of strategy of shutting down.

- Then there's restlessness and regrets, remorse.
- And then the last one is doubt. And I'll say more about that.

But what keeps these so powerful for us is that they have their genesis in the stories we tell. To try to be mindful of the hindrances without recognizing that a story is driving it, it's sometimes very hard to get your handle on it. It's possible to bring a lot of mindfulness to the sensations, the feelings, the impulses, and be present in such a way that something quiets and settles. But the power that these hindrances can have, and why sometimes they become almost addictive, is that humans are storytellers, and we can tell really good stories.

And these stories are good for you in the sense that they're good to get you hooked in. And so sensual desire—it's not sometimes just pure desire for sensual pleasure, but sometimes there's a whole story around that sensual pleasure. I leave it to your imagination what some of those might be. I don't want to suggest anything.

But, you know, there's elaborate stories, and one of the key features of those stories is a certain person, a certain character. Chances are, it's you. And so it's something about there's a story about you and what you need or deserve or should have or be. That's all mixed up in the story of sensual desire.

Ill will—it's certainly a story that we have about something, someone in the world. We have something happen. We have an event. We have an idea of an event. We have an imagination of an event.

We make up stories. We have ideas, and we're living in a story-making mind. We're repeating the same story over and over again. I find it remarkable how often I can say the same thing in my head. If any of you came along next to me and could hear how repetitive I am, you would wonder about my sanity, but I think it's just as interesting every time.

So maybe you're not like that, but the stories of ill will, sloth, and torpor are probably connected to some interpretation, some idea of what's happening. This is too much for me. I can't handle it. This is too dangerous for me. I can't handle it.

This—I just want to shut down. I want to avoid. One of the reasons people get really sleepy is they're overstimulated. What they're experiencing is too difficult for them. And I saw that in action when I had babies.

Babies, if they got in a really noisy environment, a chaotic, noisy environment, they would

go to sleep. I think they're protecting themselves. And adults do that sometimes when it has to do with a lot of difficult emotions, events. And those are connected to stories.

Stories of what we want, what we don't want, stories of what's dangerous, what is preferable, what we can do, what we need to get, what we can't get, what will happen if things continue. So we're telling these stories in doubt, in regrets. That's a story. Something happened in the past that we're still living in and telling a story over and over again.

And every time we tell a story, it's like the mood music in a TV show where if it's a pastoral, beautiful, nice, you know, forest path, it's just this most peaceful thing and nice until the ominous music starts. And if they're really good creating the ominous music, your hair stands up on end. You know what's going to happen. This is, you know—

But we do. We provide the mood music for ourselves. Our regrets: "I feel sorry for myself. Oh, it's terrible. And I'll never recover. And I can't let her—like I'm stuck. And I'm a bad person."

And boy, am I a bad person. And there's so many different ways we can say, "I'm a bad person." Some of us are very smart and do it in intelligent ways. Doesn't make it any better, but the mood music becomes deleterious. It undermines us, diminishes us.

So it's a story we're living in and repeating. Doubt is interesting because generally we understand doubt as doubt about the teachings, about ourselves, our ability to do the practice, doubt about the teachers, doubt about the teachings. When the Buddha gave teachings about this fifth hindrance, he said the doubt: who has doubt about what is wholesome and unwholesome? Doubt about what is healthy and unhealthy.

So it's very particular. When reality appears in front of you, do you know what the healthy way is to meet that, or do you have doubt? The word that's translated as doubt can probably better be translated as uncertainty, indecisiveness. We're indecisive. We don't know which is the wholesome thing, what's the unwholesome thing here.

And the idea is to start discovering, be able to recognize for ourselves in the moment, what's the healthy response and what's the unhealthy response. What's the way that we feed the wound, and what's the way that we feed this constructing operating system and reinforce that? And in order to have a sense of that deep recognition of what's wholesome and unwholesome, we have to have cultivated a deep sensitivity. We have to have stopped long enough, gotten quiet long enough, just enough.

Stop the—not an easy thing to do—but quiet the constructed, constructing thinking machine so it doesn't interfere with feeling and sensing the feeling of healthiness, nourishment. Nourishment that kind of courses through our muscles, our veins, our nerves. Feeling all this, be-

ing at peace, being calm, feels good. Sitting quietly, you know, on the lawn down there, and looking at the pond, and a kind of calm sets in.

This feels healthy. This feels good. And then you start thinking, you know, in this kind of calm, I bet I can guess what the right lottery number is for that big lottery prize. And, you know, I could really use a few hundred million dollars. And if I do that, I'll build a house in Hawaii and a house in the Sierras, and I'll do this here, and I can get a nice car.

Not just one car. I might want to get lots of cars. And off you go to the races, they say, right? And if you pay really careful attention and recognize how peaceful and calm you were sitting at the pond looking at a book, and how you got all worked up and excited by this wonderful made-up story of winning a lottery ticket, by the time you're done, you're all agitated. That doesn't feel healthy anymore.

You're the person who can measure: "Oh, that didn't feel good. That wasn't the right direction." Ideally, you'd recognize that right away when you begin going down some avenue. "Oh. This is not the influence I want to have. I want to have a different influence. How do I be here to allow something different to happen?"

So this idea of doubt is, in the moment, we're indecisive about how to meet anything in a way that is healthy. And one of the ways we can learn as mindfulness practitioners: it's always healthy to meet it with this calm, mindful awareness. That's a healthy thing. No doubt about that.

But because we live in these stories and predictions of the future and how things have to unfold and become better in some kind of abstract future kind of way, we overlook the simple, simple, simple moment. The next moment: can we be? Can the uncertainty of how to be with this experience, this event, now? You go down to the dining room, you're hungry, and the line for lunch is really long.

You have all kinds of choices. You can get worried, anxious: "Eat your favorite cookie down there, favorite dessert, favorite something, favorite oatmeal." And, you know, you get anxious, you get worried, you get impatient, you get angry at the people who are going so slow. And if you really feel that impatience and anger, that's a choice you made, maybe unconsciously, and it's not the best for you.

Is there a better choice? Is there one that brings forth, gives birth to, some good feelings, something nice? Maybe it would be, you know, maybe other people are feeling this way. Why don't I go to the back of the line? Why don't I just sit down, wait, and just do *mettā* for everyone?

Wish everyone well. I mean, that's kind of radical to do that. Maybe you stay in line, but you do your *mettā* from the line. Or maybe you realize, "Oh, that's ridiculous. That's not very realistic. I can't do that."

But maybe what you can do is that what's healthy is to meet your impatience. "Let me hold my impatience with mindfulness." That's a good way to be in line. That I'm engaged in the practice in a good way. Mindfulness is like the sunlight that plants can grow in.

So something good will grow. So we have a choice. Which operating system are you going to operate from? And so, to have enough presence of mind here that you can see where you have some choice, and in a relaxed way choose the choice which is healthy, but choose it in a healthy way.

It's easy to know that there's a wholesome thing to do, like, "Okay, I'll sit down to *mettā*. Let me rush over there to the chair and get the best chair in the house, where I can really see everyone. And I'm going to bless them with all my great *mettā*. I'm the best *mettā* person. I'm going to really get busy and do it fast *mettā*."

Well, yes, *mettā* will be healthy for you, but how you're doing it is not going to work. So the reference point in the early Buddhist teachings is constantly to refer back to things: what is healthy here and what's unhealthy, what is wholesome, what's unwholesome, what is skillful, what's unskillful. And to learn to recognize that, so that doubt doesn't exist.

You might have doubts about a lot of things practically, but of course there's things we don't know and are uncertain about. But you can have a healthy relationship to that kind of uncertainty. "Oh, I don't know. Should I wear a jacket to the early morning sitting on the lawn, or should I not?" Uncertain. What should I do?

Well, I certainly don't have to be anxious about it. What would be a healthy thing to do? Let's just bring it along and use it if I need it. But we don't really know if we need it. So what I'm trying to convey is this idea that to evaluate things from the point of view of wholesome and unwholesome, healthy and unhealthy, is constantly beneficial.

Constantly, you're finding the path every step that you take along the way. You don't find the solution to life from the right lottery ticket, but at every point you go along, you find your way. So we're running out of time, but I wanted to give the other metaphor, the other teaching the Buddha gave.

So the hindrances come out of this operating system that makes things up, constructs things. The example of things that arise out of this womb, this deeper source within us, is described

as being born. It's described as arising. It's described as something that we enter into. Something that pervades, something we feel.

So when we have some inspiration, confidence in this practice, in the potential of this practice, the Buddha said that that inspiration in the practice, inspiration in the purpose of the practice, can give rise to gladness. That gladness gives birth to joy. The joy spreads tranquility through the body. The tranquility gives rise, gives birth, to happiness, and from happiness we enter *samādhi*, enter concentration.

Some people have called this the gladness cascade. One flows to the next, cascades downwards. So you don't have to fully understand what I'm saying. What I'm trying to convey is that there's a whole understanding of things that happen in a very natural way. And what we're trying to do in this practice here is to stay close to where that naturalness can occur, close to where this natural operating system of the metaphorical womb can give birth to a whole process that we can't construct, but we can allow and support and grow.

And the number one thing that I believe grows this thing, like the number one thing that grows plants, is sunlight. And so the number one thing that grows what's best in us is the sunlight of mindfulness, of awareness. You don't have to get in there and fix things and adjust things and do too much. It's healthy to do some of that, to make choices, healthy choices, about what to do and how to respond and how to relate.

But be supported by, use the mindfulness, trust the mindfulness. The mindfulness is what will allow something deep to happen. If you are deeply embodied, connected here, and your mindfulness is not thoughtfulness, your mindfulness is not thinking about things, but rather sensing and feeling and observing, and very, very simple, radically simple, like sunlight that just shines on things—sunlight that doesn't interfere with things, maybe, but helps things to grow.

So I offer this this evening as a kind of good news. That you, each and every one of you, have wonderful natural capacities for the best in you to grow and come forth. It's not expected to all happen tomorrow. It's a slow process. But I say that so that you begin to kind of entrust yourself into this practice that we're doing here.

Entrust yourself into being really here and see if you can give up the trust you have in the constructing mind, the trust you have in the stories that you tell yourself, the stories which are so much behind many of the challenging emotions we have. Instead of trusting that part of us, who we are, trust here in our body. Even if it's difficult, trust opening, trust feeling, sensing, and find that middle way.

Where you don't have to be for or against anything, where you don't have to accept or reject anything, where you don't have to be the victim of anything, where you don't have to be the responsible one for things, where you can just be quiet, settled, trusting, being present here for this. And there will be difficulties that come, but that doesn't mean you can't meet it with something wholesome, healthy. Whatever difficulty there is here, can you meet it with something healthy?

And the healthiest thing might simply be to be present for it, present without doing anything to it, even letting go of it. Just here, just seeing it, knowing it, and see what the light of awareness does. See what influence that has on you. And slowly over time, the source of the influence that influences your life is no longer the external world.

But the source is in you. You carry it with you where you go, and then the world is not a dangerous place anymore, because you carry the safety inside. So thank you. And so, for those of you who will come to the next sitting, I'll be here and welcome you at the refuges again at the end of the sitting.