

2005-11-14 Precepts: Not Taking Intoxicants

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SPEAKERS

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This this evening is the last talk in this series of talk. I've been giving on the precepts, the five lay precepts. Can people hear Okay, we're using the one working today, okay. And in the classic presentation of Buddhist practice, it begins with the practice practice of ethics. And ethics is much more than just the precepts also includes practice of generosity, right speech and right ethical things, but the precepts are right in the center of the ethical life in Buddhism, and that one wouldn't practice meditation until one is well established ethically. Here in the West, we have the Often upside down, where many people in the West when they begin Buddhist practice, they start with meditation. And, and then what often happens is after some time practicing meditation, sometimes it's, you know, it could be anything, short term long term depending on people's how rotation unfolds. People get interested in how they live their lives. They, they want to find some way to live their lives. That's in harmony with the sense of integrity, a sense of harmony, this sense of well being, that sense of freedom, that sense of something, compassion that arises from meditation practice. And so then people get interested, how do I live my life so that my life is not just a foundation for meditation practice, this helps my meditation, but my daily life actually is an expression of what I'm realizing and understanding of dating life. At this point, some people on the West End become interested in And the precepts and sometimes not so much as, as, as foundations again for practice, but rather as a way of helping them express the freedom, the sense of well being they found inside. And some people use the precepts then as guidelines because that with the idea that when you're about to break a precept, necessarily if you're bad or wrong, but that when you've got to break them, it's probably a very good time to stop and look and see what's really going on here. Chances are that when you break a precept, you've somehow lost touch with that sense of place of integrity that you've touched in meditation. And so maybe it's important then to re establish that connection to the place of integrity. If you're harried or upset or angry, and you want to do something that breaks the precepts wrong speech or stealing or any any of them, then stop and look and we established that connection. If you feel what you feel like You lost it.

So

there were there are some people who are quite content with this way that started in meditation and eventually get the precepts. And there's some people who are horrified in the Buddhist world, that you would teach meditation without first teaching ethics. But as I tell people horrified if I offered a right now I'm doing endings last week of a five week class also on mindfulness meditation intro class. I did I do. And now we have some 6070 people who come every week to this class. I think it's quite remarkable. So many people will come. But then, but if I had advertised that, we were doing a five week class introduction to ethics. Well, people would have come, but I don't know if we have that many people. We have that many people here tonight. So I don't know I don't know many of you knew we're doing a series. But I think many of you who are new Also, we're gonna come anyway. You're kind of a captured audience right to come in and whatever he talks about, okay. But

so anyway,

so today's the last day, and we're talking about the precept of no intoxication, which is a very interesting one. Now, I'll say a little bit about the kind of the technical or the legalistic aspects of the precepts because it's kind of interesting. And that is that the wording of the precept is to refrain. Actually, this way, the Pali the original Buddhist language, where this is laid out, the original grammar is ambiguous. Know what it means. So there's a live call right? So whenever there's a loophole in ethics, we like that or we don't. But so, the ambiguity is does the grammar say I will refrain from intoxicating drinks and drugs? Or does it say I will refrain from intoxicating myself with drinks or alcohol with alcohol and drugs. So, the difference is that in the second way you can, you might still partake in alcohol and drugs, but not to the point of getting intoxicated. So, mostly that means, like, you know, social drinking, you know, you can drink a little, you know, glass of wine and you don't even get tipsy you know, just kind of a nice thing. It's nice social thing and And you know, doesn't make them you know, bother anything been doing for 30 years. It doesn't bother bother you or anybody's and nothing changes. And so what what is the precept say? Is it to say absolutely no alcohol or no no alcohol to the point of intoxication? You'll find different Buddhist teachers will have very strong opinions about which side of this divide, they see the grammar. And actually the people who have the strongest opinions tend to be the one to say the grammar says absolutely no drinks, no alcoholic drinks. The people who say you know, well, you know, as long as you don't get intoxicated, they all seem to have strong opinions and, you know, whatever. If you're a monastic, a Buddhist monk or nun, then the explanations of this or that the wording of it is much Less ambiguous. There it says that you're not allowed to have any more alcohol. You're not allowed to have even the amount of alcohol that would fit on the tip of a blade of grass. If it's less than that, maybe it's okay. And but however, there are exceptions for medicinal purposes, so medicines are prepared with alcohol and the monastics are allowed in that case to, to use it.

So

the other interesting thing about this precept about alcohol is that as we know, there's five lay precepts commonly. This comes down to us in the teachings of the Buddha. There's a lot of discussion about ethics and about precepts. However, in many places, it's the first four people steps they get discussion. Sometimes all five precepts are just discussed and presented, but often only the first four are presented in the classic description of right action and right right action in the full path, it's the first four precepts which are mentioned. Now, the fifth. So a number of places is the first four, which are considered really important or talked about the fifth gets kind of like it's kind of, sometimes not included, sometimes included. There's some kind of ambiguity or some kind of difference between the fifth precept and the other four. And one difference perhaps, is that the other the first four precepts, killing stealing sexual misconduct and lying can be seen as involving other people and generally harming other people. Whereas it could be said that alcohol if you do it, you know if you lock your lock yourself in your House, don't leave alone, that chances are that it just something very personal doesn't really affect other people. And so it's not interpersonal the way that the other four are. So it doesn't cause interpersonal harm automatically. You could, in theory, drink alcohol and not cause harm. So there's some difference there with the precepts. So this is an issue of the interpersonal world becomes important. And so part of the reasons for following the five precepts of the four precepts is not just for your own sake, but also out of compassion and care for your friends and neighbors and family in the world around you. But you don't want to cause harm. So then, which we don't have to think very, very long before we realize that alcohol and drugs in our society creates a tremendous amount of harm in our society. Tremendous amount, and my guess is that the high they the greatest percentage of people who are in car started to independent states prisons are there because of drugs that perhaps one might know here, but probably not right? And

so,

two stories, two nested monk stories. There were two monks who were walking down the path. And one of the monks said, this spot here would be a good place for a temple. And the second monk plucks up a blade of grass and sticks it into the ground and says, the tempo is built. And so one way of understanding the story is that every place wherever you are, that's a good place to build the temple. Wherever you are, wherever you wherever you are, wherever you go, there you are, right? wherever you are. That's the place where you create a sacred space. So you could think it's saying, well, wherever you are, that's where Heaven is found. That's where Paradise is found. That's where the kingdom of God is found. That's where, you know, the enlightened experience with sacred is found. But usually, the way the story is understood is a little bit different in that it's not that the place itself independent of view is sacred. But an action on your part makes the place you're you're at Sacred. So in the month, plucks a greater blade of grass, and sticks it in the ground, says a temple is made. So we have to do something in order to make the place we're at Sacred. We Could we contribute to it? And now you could, you know, go collect lots of bricks and build a big Cathedral, like a big temple. But that's not you know, as interesting as what really makes in Buddhism, what makes each place we are

in each moment each situation sacred is a quality of our attention, or awareness, the mindfulness we bring the care we bring to the situation. There's something so important in attention itself, that has the nature of being that creates a situation into some kind of sacred dimension. So what is it what what is it in awareness that makes it sacred? Some of you have the experience of having been seen or met with someone else have a real sense of presence, or maybe just being in a place and feel very, very present fully present, future and past kind of fade away. The present moment feels timeless, it but for the timeless presence. To be here, there has to be awareness. to really see someone or be seen, takes presence takes awareness. Somehow the awareness is what makes things sacred and special. Even in situations where things are not going right, or so called, if they're not going well, when we're suffering, there is some way of meeting our suffering, meaning the suffering of the world with kind of presence would have awareness that Buddhism would say makes it somewhat sacred.

So

so we have to contribute to the sacred. So if we sit back and just kind of think, Well, you know, I just, you know, life is sacred. It's really great and I just sit in my easy chair and enjoy it. Chances are, that you're not contributing to making this world sacred. But it's the meeting with our awareness.

That's the first story

The second monastic story is the story of a monk who was who

was dared

or was required his his different versions of the story when it when it when it was he was dared, they took off the deer. But another one was that somehow he was kidnapped, held at knifepoint or threatened say we're gonna do some horrible thing to somebody unless you break one of the precepts. You dare break one of the presets one of the five precepts or you have to otherwise something terrible is gonna happen.

So

the monk reflects about the precepts and he says, Well, I don't want to kill anybody. I don't want to steal from anybody. I don't want to engage in sexual misconduct with anybody. I don't want to lie because all those have to do other people and cause bad karma for other people perhaps. But I can get drunk. Because you know that just myself, I do it on my own. And you know, luckily you can affect anybody. So, guess what I'll do so he, he goes and gets drunk. Once he's drunk, he breaks off for the other presets. So there's a tendency among some people when they get drunk or tipsy even to begin losing certain degree of control or clarity about their actions in their behavior. certain kind of healthy inhibition sometimes is let go of, and people do things which later they wish they had never done. So

there were, you know, two maybe categories of drinking alcohol or taking drugs. One is light social drinking or light drinking. And the other is actually drinking to the point of becoming intoxicated or becoming an alcoholic. And both of them have their rationale for doing them, both them and have them reasonably motivated to do it. And both of them I think, could require could use some investigation, some understanding of what's going on there. And some of them have the same route. One route for drinking. And sometimes it's said as being one of the most important motivations for drinking alcohol from lots of people. alcoholics is they feel some degree of disharmony. They feel lonely, they feel afraid they feel somehow depressed or upset or something feels off with them, they feel down in some way. And alcohol is the vehicle or drugs can be a vehicle for somehow feeling they reestablish harmony, we establish a sense of well being or pleasure or lift themselves out of that funk. I know some people who will drink alcohol just a little bit before they go to before they go to the party. Because you get to the party you're supposed to be kind of the basis of flow the flow of the conversation supposed to be smooth, supposed to be kind of boring and happy and, and just little the alcohol kind of takes that little edge off your shyness or inhibition and or your something and you can just, you can can be much more fun to be with when you drink. So there's some feeling that's how we are at the moment is not okay. We're not willing to sit with it or be with it, we want to fix it or change it for something we think is better. So from a point of view of practice, of making this moment sacred, there's a lost opportunity. And the last opportunity is to somehow meet our life, in our case, our pain, with compassionate awareness with careful attention. And in meeting with careful attention, creates something very different for ourselves, find our freedom, find our presence, find something, find love, by compassion, something by offering ourselves that kind of care. When we, when we turn away from that, by drinking and trying to fix the problem by drink, we lose this very important opportunity. And I would argue that when we're trying to fix ourselves by drinking, we're actually moving in the opposite direction from the sun.

It's maybe relief.

But it's not release. It's maybe pleasure. But it's not leading to happiness. It's maybe, you know, it's, you know, it doesn't really take us in the direction that someone who's engaged in a spiritual practice wants to go. Someone wants to go to practice of waking up. It's taking in the wrong direction.

So So

I think in looking at this precept of non toxic, you know what toxication each person is going to have to decide later a person's gonna have to decide for themselves. Whether it's no alcohol at all, or whether it's even just Little bit like once every year having a glass of wine or something very light, or whether it's just you know, every day, it's, you know, just a little bit less than the tip of a grass, blade of grass, you know? And, you know, to decide for ourselves. But I think that in deciding for ourselves, it's very important to look at what motivates drinking, to really be honest about it, and then ask the question. Does this really serve your best interest? Is there a better way? Alcohol sometimes is a quick way,

quick fix for drugs to change things. But is it really in the long term? Going to make things better? what I hope is that people who do a meditation practice, do mindfulness practice. Sooner or later, begin learning a couple capacity for cultivating a sense of well being that is independent of drugs, alcohol. And not only that, but any of the conditions of their life, that no matter what the conditions of their life is like, they have the capacity to tune in and find a place of being settled, calm, peaceful, and to some degree, a sense of well being. And, and that becomes a resource. If there's some problem. The advantage of that is by turning inward, sometimes then we have to deal with what is going on there isn't we don't not bypassing it, or pain or suffering or fear or hostility or whatever's going on there. But you have to actually face it and try to work with it and settlement. So, that becomes the solution. That becomes the way of working with disharmony with loneliness, whatever is going on. I have the capacity to go in That becomes hopefully a resource becomes easier and easier to tap into. It's not something you have to kind of go and meditate for an hour to do or meditate for a whole day to do because some something that maybe even just two or three breaths are just kind of remembering, oh, you know, oh, let me wake up here. I forgotten to be present. me bring be present here and in that presence, find something. It's very satisfying. I find that presence or mindfulness is very satisfying is a very strange thing. I find it very satisfying. I said, there's some kind of very deep satisfaction in being present. In situations where someone is suffering greatly if I'm with someone who has some horrible suffering, and I don't want them to have the suffering, or I'm suffering, and doesn't seem like I don't want it, I'd like to help them in some way. The and it's you know, someone's not shouldn't be that they're suffering this way. But fact that they're suffering, given that they're suffering there's something satisfying about being awake and present for that. That's very different than it is fretting over to worrying about it or trying to were away from it or escape it or all the other ways we can relate to pain. There's a very satisfying about being awake to it. And if we learn how that satisfaction of being awake to pain, then a lot of the motivation for drinking or drugs, I think falls away for many people. Some people could say, well, I don't drink because of pain. I don't drink because I feel this aren't harmonious with my world. It just pleasure just to like give some people go for a massage and go for a walk. You know, I just you know, get this really good wine, gala wine or something. And you know, it's just so sweet. And so nice. And or some people say well, I just It's just me kind of freeze, you know, we get along. And I do know what's very common with alcohol and you all know, is a phenomena of denial that people sometimes don't really look honestly what's really going on. And the other thing about alcohol, though, and this is this is the kind of begins broaching the interpersonal dimension is that alcohol is not something we only do personally. It's something that generally we don't do it locked up in our rooms and no effect on others. Our behavior affects the world around us. Generally, people don't make their own alcohol. Some people do, but you know, you buy into a whole alcohol or drug industry, which is not necessarily the most to say, but say this way. One of the clearest ethical kind of strong lines that the Buddha put about ethically ethical behavior was he said, a lay person should not actually not engage in the commerce, of alcohol. You know, so, you know, exactly, you know, should you drink or eat or drink to the point of intoxication or drink at all, you know, sort of ambiguous how to do that, but no commerce, you know, involved in the sale or the production of alcohol. Same thing with weapons don't get no involvement in commerce or production of weapons or of poisons and the other, the other one is not involved in the commerce of people. So slaves and prostitution, we got this. So

these things are completely off bounds for Buddhists. If you want unambiguous Buddhist standards. These are unambiguous.

So

So you know, buying alcohol we buy into this huge industry. And then also, people are watching us, people, you know, take their cues from us. See what we're doing, you know what we do and subtly reinforce it with other people do suddenly or greatly. Now, I first saw this very clearly. When I was living at the San Francisco Zen Center, where most a lot of students I knew there did not refrain from alcohol.

But

they were not allowed to have alcohol at the Zen center. The temple was a place where there was no alcohol allowed. And it was a very important place because it was a refuge for people who were struggling with alcohol and drugs. And there are a lot of people who are struggling about five, six years ago, someone who came regularly to Monday night said, Gil, you need to give a talk about recovery or alcohol or something because you would know this because you don't go to a meetings or recovery meetings. But there's a lot of people who come to Monday night. Go to recovery meetings. I don't know if that's still true. Could have shot a show of hands if you maybe I shouldn't ask and lost my train of thought. Even nothing alcohol, you can lose your clarity. So how we affect other people so a temple is that is that the Zen center was a place that was a refuge for people who were struggling. It was very helpful for them to know there's a place they could Come. And there were some times that the behavior of people has in center was not exemplary. Some of the priests, the teachers, and there was one time in particular, where one of the most senior teachers there, did it, basically an ethical transgression, not with alcohol. And it was very instructive to me there was the people, some of the people who were alcoholics were struggling with that issue. They needed to have a place of refuge where they really felt they could rely on the people, they're being somehow ethically upright. And when the senior teachers was was not ethically upright, it was really good. They felt really shaky, their ground, their refuge, their kind of life support was kind of taken away from them. And so I think it's a great gift to our society, to offer places that are refugees from alcohol and drugs for people who are struggling. So I feel very strongly that our building here should be a place that's alcohol free. And because it's it offerings a gift to people. So when we have potlucks, for example, not to have wine here, or alcohol, or drugs for the potluck. And then then also individual people can live that way. Individuals can live their life. So it's a gift to people who need that extra support. And so when they know they come to your house, they know they're not going to be tempted, or feel awkward because everyone else is drinking, you know, they're not going to drink or, or just the fact that maybe you're the only other person in the party who's not drinking and that person who's struggling with alcoholism, sees Oh, let me just stand near you or do they help me to know that someone else is that way, so that it's easier for me? I think it's a great gift. So that's another motivation for this precept is it's a gift to our

society and I would argue that none of you of course, but maybe I shouldn't say it that way, but our society in general is in desperate need of people who are going to offer that gift desperately. It just it's, it's phenomenal. It just astounding the degree to which people in this country are struggling and suffering and causing harm through alcohol and drugs. And so whatever we can do to help that I think is a step in the right direction. So those are my thoughts. So what do you think? If you want to ask any questions or raise any issues or criticisms or reservations, geared

up curious about some religion that I heard or read about required, sort of

Kind of mind altering substance?

Yeah, there are some there. I mean, there's many religions that include alcohol or drugs as part of their,

their thing.

You know, in Catholic communion and Sunday morning, they drink a little bit. I have no idea how much they drink. I just very little, like a sip. You know, it's pretty light. And, and so, you know, it's like the monks are allowed to have alcohol as medicine. So I think communion is but I've heard that anyway. And then and then there's a Native American religions or certain certain religions where they take psychotropic drugs, and they do that as part of their spiritual practice. And it's usually done in a controlled way. So usually, ideally, there'd be an elder there your guidance away, which is done. And so some people I know some people feel that's not breaking the precept because you It's not for the purposes of intoxication. And in the control setting or doing it I'm not going about to break the other precepts. It's really for the purpose of entering some kind of spiritual dimension or to spiritual practice. And

so

so some people feel that way. And some people, some people, it's their practice, and I don't think that there's any basis. I know. I don't know what more to say. Yes. I heard

heard a talk by tech not Han A long time ago that was very impressed me very much because people were coming to him with this question as well. And it seems to me if I remember this correctly was that he suggested that you not engage in this activity, where other people who are not also engaging in this activity are present, and that you particularly refrain when children are present because you have an influence over them, whether you realize it or not. And he was suggesting, for example, that people drink in houses, not in public places. And that seemed to be an interesting compromise, and that I'm not exactly sure how I feel about it. But it was certainly an interesting,

interesting idea. And one way of looking at that kind of behavior, refraining drinking in public or in front of children, is thinking of it as a gift. It's an act of generosity rather than some moralistic thing. Yes. We'd like to use the mic so if you can, wait for it. Thank you. There's some people who can't hear otherwise.

If he included other things like that

it's very it's a common enough for people to extend this precept to anything that intoxicates the mind or is toxic for the mind or anything which So, you know, certain kind of, you know, there's a lot of things which we lose our clarity lose our common sense we can toxicated and, you know, certainly television could do that at times and, and, you know, a lot of things. So, politics can do it.

For some people

in the back

never stops Towards addiction.

with alcohol

there was one stage where you started looking forward to the time when you could have a drink and you're projecting forward and you're anticipating and desiring

the people who meditate, start getting very sensitive or have a different perspective on addiction. Because we realize how powerful and pervasive the addictive tendencies can be in human beings. Because, you know, we're addicted to our thinking. You know, you sit and try to meditate and nothing can sense and you know, you realize, you know what, you know, not simply Thinking comes back over and over again. But there's just tremendous drive and addictions you know, and addiction is is it's to the point where it's actually quite frightening for some people to give up their thinking. So, then to begin understanding how does desire drives us? up here in the front though,

about intoxicated How about with caffeine? Is that so pervasive society and

put it this on myself and I'm drinking it one because I really am addicted to pizza.

But if I find if I go to someplace where the coffee is not if it's not good coffee or there's not really good tea, I don't have any preference to drink water. So then I'm putting more in the desert. side then the effect side. Like I always thought when I was in school, I was drinking coffee just because it gave me something to do because if I had to hold a cup I couldn't fall asleep said put the coffee in my lap. It wasn't the effect of the caffeine. But where does that play in? So

generally, except for like we take not Han at times, generally in a terabyte and Buddhist tradition or boost Jewish in general, that fifth precept does not extend itself to things like caffeine, and tobacco. And you could argue that there's a kind of a genuine caffeine doesn't make you less clear headed. Sometimes makes you more clear headed, you know if you're

sleeping or something,

and so usually not extended to that. So it's not an ethical issue, but it might be both an addiction to coffee or an addiction to caffeine or addiction to tobacco, for example, might be a spiritual issue, in that it has to do with How free you are the freedom in your hearts freedom in your mind. And I remember my father telling me when when he was when I was about, I don't know, maybe eight or something like that is when he stopped smoking cigarettes. And he said that he found himself out of cigarettes at midnight. And finally, I found himself walking to the neighborhood store. When he got to the store, he said, This is ridiculous. And then he just stopped smoking from that day on from that, because it seems so ridiculous. So it's not a spirit, not an ethical issue, but might be a spiritual issue, or a liberation issue.

koan I saw someone

commented it is a disease the fifth, it's fine You think it doesn't fit? Tell me more. What's your what's your what's your concern?

I think what I

know when I stopped smoking, it was very much. Yeah,

stop.

Right. However, I have family

members who are long term.

Right. And that's, that's an easy

process. It's a

physical disease.

Well, I mean, it's, I mean, it's different shirts different. The what's driving is different. But I think that and so what we found, you know, like with recovery with a, it's very hard to do recovery work alone. So when people have this kind of As a disease, for example, there's a whole way of understanding how to relate to that. And some people, some people is very helpful to realize they have a disease because they feel like they're out of control. So something else is, you know, you know, this was the first was a first step in a, you know, realize that was to say it, right?

You What,

one person? Yes. What's the first step? So that's a little bit similar to say no, saying I got something like a disease, some things I can't control and deal with. And then you, you, you begin looking for other resources, you know, some power that's greater than yourself and various things. And so, in Buddhism, one of the powers is greater than ourselves as our awareness. You know, we don't take our awareness. Personally, I think it's, um, you know, it's a power bigger than the ego, for example, and so, but anyway, People, if you have, if it's the level of being an addiction, like a disease, it's very important to realize you can't do it alone. And so it's often you need to find a group of people to be with or community or get some kind of support for that work. And sometimes people go into addiction programs, you know, and even get the residential programs to work with it, because it's so powerful and need a lot of support. And so this idea of our behavior, being a gift to people to other people, you know, it is really hard for people to refrain. And so to be in an environment where that's supported is really helpful. And so our behavior can be a gift. You know, we refrain I don't know if that answered your question. But the I think that the skills of mindfulness are very helpful for any kind of event. We now out when alcoholism is a disease, even though it's something they'd be biological that's going on. The skills of presence of non reactivity, compassion, equanimity that come with mindfulness, give it give you some way of stepping out of the force and the power of those drives. The last thing I'll say is some of you know the story about me that when I'm early 20s, I went to live on what's called the farm commune. In Tennessee when I was there, there was seven or 800 people who lived in this commune hippie commune. It it kind of was it was a outgrowth of the psychedelic scene in San Francisco. They just transported themselves from Haight Ashbury to rural Tennessee. And, and,

at some point,

they got arrested the leaders of the community for marijuana On our drug, sometimes drugs, the leaders of the community spent a year in jail. And they realized that they couldn't really do psychedelics anymore in Tennessee.

So

LSD in particular, so they decided to stop doing LSD. But LSD was such an LSD was their spiritual practice and when the main spiritual practices they had, and so they had to find a substitute for this very powerful drug. And what they found that was they said, it was as powerful as LSD

is

honesty.

So,

why don't you you know, try a good dose of honesty And may Your honesty be as powerful and you find out how honesty can be

used to be

as powerful as LSD, which for some people was the door for opening up the whole spiritual dimension for them and honesty is phenomenal. Thank you