

# 2007-04-15 Human Nature

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## SPEAKERS

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I thought this morning I would share with you some thoughts about the topic of human nature. And not that I have any definitive final say on the topic. But perhaps it will stimulate you to think a little bit more about your concepts of human nature and, and maybe have some interesting discussions about it, other people I think that believe that everyone has some kind of concept of what human nature is like, even if we don't use that expression, human nature. It could be that it's kind of subconscious or unthought about, for some understanding of what it means to be a human being that goes into decisions to make about what is important for us in our lives, decisions or what we do. We don't do and You find in history of religions in history of Buddhism, different ideas about the innate qualities of the human being, the essential qualities or core nature of what it means to be human. And in the history of Buddhism, there's been a variety. One, in the early Buddhist tradition, one of the core aspects was the potential to be enlightened. And that enlightenment, that liberation came from the human capacity to train it's trained ourselves, we can train we can develop the mind, the heart is supposed to be developed. And with effort we can develop ourselves, so to create those conditions that allows liberation to happen. A very strong curd of Buddhist thought and human nature, in East Asian Buddhism, in China, in particular, and even more so in Japan has the view that human nature is what it is, but it's limited by The conditions of the times that we live in. And in the first 500 years time of the Buddha afterwards, the conditions were right for people to be able to train develop themselves and become awakened on their own effort. But But 500 years after the Buddha lived, we, the universe, the world, the world system we're in, entered into the degenerate age. And in this age that we're currently living in according to this view, it's no longer possible for anybody to kind of cultivate and develop themselves, in fact, to do that, to try to do that represents a form of egotism, self centeredness, that actually stands in the way of some kind of real transformation. And in this view, which is quite popular in East Asian Buddhism, the only way to get liberated you can't do it on your own effort is by using an other power and the other power is Cosmic Buddha named Amida Buddha. And so it's a little bit of a somewhat like Protestant Christianity, where grace comes in that grace doesn't come from your good works. That comes lipworth forevers grace, your good works that counts as the grace that comes from the divine. And, and that's particularly Asian, that particular kind of East Asian Buddhism is called Pure Land Buddhism. And it's produced some very transform people, because there's something very deep surrender that can happen, surrender of self that done the right way, can can certainly make a beautiful, peaceful person. And then you have also in Mahayana, Buddhism, you have the idea of Buddha nature, that human nature is characterized humans are characterized by having something called Buddha nature, which is a very, tends to be a very positive view of human beings that somehow we have inside of us, perhaps a kernel or seed or some people in some hyaena beliefs, it's like somehow in us there is this thing, like a soul almost called Buddha nature, other Mahayana to go along with traditional Buddhist ideas, there is no so we'll say, well, it's not a seed, per se, but it's a potential. We all have that potential. And, and some people say it has to be trained and developed. But it gives a very positive view of

human life. And the teachings about Buddha nature usually come along with substance that there's a crisis of benign operation, a kind of a innate movement, within the human psyche, human part, towards the good towards liberation. Something's quite beautiful. This you know, some people like to contrast this with certain religious teachings, especially outside of Buddhism that you Human nature,

you know is there's something fundamentally wrong with human beings. And our coordinator has something off. And somehow eating apples has to do a lot to do with us. And so the actually not much more to it than that, of course. But I shouldn't take it light lightly, but some idea that, that there's something off the sinful nature something. You find people that who will contrast Buddhism with other religions saying that Buddhism has this idea of innate beauty or sacredness in the human heart, as opposed to others to see there's something fundamentally wrong with us. We have to be saved from the outside or we have to repent or do something.

So you know, what do you believe? So who are we and what do we what is our potential If you believe that we can be trained, that we can develop ourselves, then people will apply themselves to that effort. If you believe that your capacities are fixed, then there's no need to train and you are what you are. I read recently, study psychologist at Stanford, who described people's mindsets of people who are actually quite skilled in something like really good athletes. And there's a culture in certain fairly athletic world these days. I mean, talk to the clinic world, that somehow that you feeling is you're born being a great athlete. And so you don't have to really train to the fact that train kind of shows that maybe you're not so great. And so they just show up in the field of play. They don't want to do practice and all that. And there was an English soccer team that was proudly brought to Stanford to meet with her to try to get some These tough people out of that mindset. And now they're trying to trade freely choose soccer players in England apparently. One of the things of interviewing is how they understand their own capacity. If they feel their capacities set, there's born to this great innate capacity. Even they're so interested in having a routine, even though they're great athletes, do they have the mindset that they can go through effort they can develop themselves, that then they're much more interesting to have on the team and so they'll search for people that are going to grow and develop. I had a class in college that guess was at the apology class history class on utopian communities. And remember, remember almost nothing. Maybe restate the Mennonites and Amish all kinds of places. And now except for one thing that the first reset maybe in passing And he said, the students he had, who tend to do the best, the best work, when usually not the brightest, but rather the ones who persevered. Those who put in a lot of effort to just kind of hung in there and kept working at it. And they tend to do the best work. And since I wasn't a great student I thought that was really great was really good news to me. And, and so do you make effort you have to kind of work at it. And part of my nothing good student days. When I started graduate school, I didn't know how to write. I had never really written anything seriously and went through, you know, it's kind of like I went through the University of California education system. And which I kind of, I don't know. It didn't teach me much about writing. I went through the UC California system four years of it, and didn't learn much about writing. I wrote a one term paper on intensive cultivation of apple trees. And so I got to graduate school and in the humanities, you expected to write a lot. And the first semester there I had to write two, two page papers every week. For some people, that's easy. I had an office mate, and in that time, he would come to class Monday it was due Monday. You've come to class to the office Monday morning, sit down on the typewriter back then and type out his essay turned in just you know, 123 was done. I just spent the whole weekend the whole weekend, you know, you know, the stupid these two pages and my wife You know, she was she helped me she could you edit that she'd look at the first papers and say, where'd you go to school? And so, but now people tell me that I could write pretty well, I still get a lot of help from people. And but certainly it's changed a lot over the years. And whether it was him telling the story, it was a, I had a professor who also seem to write his great academic papers, academic papers, this, you know, this quality of credit

reading a mystery novel, because you set up this kind of tension beginning and really wanted to get to the end of the second article, because it was so compelling. And I was so in awe of her papers.

And then one day she shared with me an early draft of one of her papers. And to my shock, it was crossed out you know, mistakes and Miss Miss misspelling things and I realized this is the come off her fingers you know all done. But she also spent a lot of time working on it crafting it making mistakes and it took effort and time to develop. So that's anyway so the view we have a few miniature so the people so people have various views of human nature, that may be a very personal for other people can develop it, I can. Other people can do something, but I really don't have the ability. And so it's self limiting in some way. So Buddha Nature has one idea that you find some schools of Buddhism. And when I hear about Buddha nature, it occurs to me that there is a setup for the opposite, which in Buddhist terms would be more on nature. And you don't hear Buddhists talk about Mara nature. It's so much I've ever heard that expression before. Maybe I just coined it. Mara nature morrows and the Buddhist devil more to it than that, but for that, we'll just call it that. And, and, and we like using that term however, you find and in, like in Thai Buddhism, a very strong tendency towards to, to teaching or understanding that within us, there are defilements within us there are these toxins that operate within us are these poisons within us are these, these enemies to who are what's best for us, and that you have to find Thai teachers in particular talking about the need to be a warrior to slay the inner enemies and you have to kind of fight that battlefield in there. Because you know, so rather than thinking the what's inside is beautiful and you know, the brutal nature and all that it's more sensitive, what's inside is dangerous, and you can cause a lot of noise it's very dangerous to yourself, maybe to other people as well. protect yourself from that danger, you have to do battle. People who've studied Thai Buddhism, practice Thai Buddhism, and come to the west to teach tend to drop that kind of language. And because in the West, there's a strong tendency, especially in California, to want to have a very positive image view of human nature, benign, you know, the universe is benign. And, and so, and so the kind of idea that there's something more on nature inside of us. You know, we put a big sign up in the front saying, Come to high invest to destroy your defilements. We'll do away with your enemies in within, I suspect, you know, two or three people here. Whether it's a view, this is another view of human nature that's, you find currency and within Buddhism

One of the surprises to me or one of the things I discovered over my lifetimes, lots and lots within practice itself, meditation practice in Buddhist practice is there is that aspect of my life which I need to take responsibility for. And then there's something inside of me which a variety of things which operate, when there's impulses momentums within me, that have their own power, their own set in motion, their own things. And some of those are quite beautiful and some of those are not so beautiful. So, to give an example I gave yesterday I noticed when I was a teenager, I would go skiing, schools skiing trips. We cannot wait to go skiing in during the winter and enjoy it and then it would be wouldn't be ski season for the summer, spring, summer fall. And then next winter I proceeded again. And I noticed that I was a better skier, the first day of the winter season of skiing that had been the last day of the previous winter. And others what kind of strange and I had skied all summer, but I've become a better skier. And so it was something something some kind of processing, some kind of integration was going on. Within while I was not skiing, somehow the skills that I was learning, and this is now for a relatively well known that you can memorize things, you can develop a skill. And if you really want that skill, that memorization to really stick really deeply, it helps if you have a really good night's sleep. And because the mind somehow needs the time of sleep to integrate that to process it to do something with the mind does, so it kind of becomes a little more settled in there. So You have to do the effort to memorize. But how much of how much of your effort will be ultimately responsible for memorization? I don't know what the percentage is between your efforts to memorize and your efforts to get a good night's sleep. You know, the laws allow something which is not your efforts only within you, which is not your kind of self

directed, willful effort to operate. So also when I started my Buddhist practices in center, I worked at the top of our bakeries and centers bakery. And that was the acumen in the afternoon to do the prep for the people that came in early the morning to make the bread. And I would measure out all the dry and the wet ingredients for the bread and the cakes and stuff and put the heavy dry batch in the wet batch and in the morning, they come in early in the morning to be ready for them. They dump it all together and they make bread and then we do this for enough I do this for months. And then you get into kind of a dance routine kind of almost becomes You know, kind of a ritual almost. And then a few times I would do in the morning I'd get up and go to Zen meditation. Five o'clock in the morning, and a few times it happened. I was sitting there in meditation, minding my own mind. You know, pretty calm, relaxed. I don't know maybe I was not thinking I'm a matchmaker thinking about something else but anyway, pretty settled. And then boom, out of the blue with no warning at all. So it wasn't like I was thinking about something was related or something it kind of prompted us. The soft I had left out the salt in the dries and in the Zen center, in Zen practice, when you sit You can't just sit until they ring the bell. So I couldn't just pop up and call the bakery thing, you know, the salt. I had to kind of sit there with all the feelings that came What am I done, you know and sit there with all that until I could maybe I finally was released by the bell so I can go call and but at that time was always too late. But But what they would do then has ended historically. And also maybe I don't know if it's connected to the historical pattern then has a aspect of it, where if something doesn't quite fit your screen name, it sort of fits. So you're not supposed to eat after after 12 o'clock in traditional Buddhist monastic circles, but you're allowed certain medicines. And so in Zen monasteries, they don't eat dinner, but they have a medicine meal.

And there was a there's a, there's the east wing and the West Wing of Zen temples and monasteries. And one of the ones I traded in Japan was kind of built in such a way on the mountain that was everything was reversed. And they still called that part of the building that was in the West was called the east wing. Because it all had still fit, you know. But, so with a bread they called it they split up, debate it and put it out to sale for and they said he called it stop the spread. wasn't a mistake. It wasn't. You know, a lot of people needs to sell diets so. So you're at Brown, who's the great cook at the Sahara. He told me once that once Burn the case using baked beans or something and he burned them. So, he called them barbecued beads and people came down afterwards and asked for the recipe.

See what you call things are very important including human nature. So yes, certainly this this popped up item you saw something was going on behind my conscious mind some processing some remembering something was popped into my mind I thought some of you may have had important things happen in dreams, coordinate understandings or something this happens that way sometimes. The so there's a processing that goes on that's below Often our conscious life, it's possible through things like meditation, and other there's a variety of self reflective techniques to get below the conscious mind. But meditation is certainly one of them develop enough calm enough concentration and ability to look seeing what goes on more will be called subconscious there isn't there is unconscious just that we don't see it very often. It's sometimes it's quite humbling to realize how much of the subconscious world is influencing our choices and decisions. And some of that subconscious world is beautiful. And some of its not so beautiful. Some of it's quite embarrassing or worse, to see what's kind of driving us or decisions and things like that. And then below the subconscious is their, you know, unconscious motivations or impulses or conditions that allow things to happen. And find the analogy that of cutting your finger. You could do it intentionally have a wart to take it out. To do something, or you cut yourself cooking or something, they have a cut. And you as the caretaker of that cut, have important responsibilities to make it heal well. And one of them is to keep it clean. And perhaps cover it so you know, stays clean and create the right conditions for its healing, but you cannot orchestrate its healing. I think it's a very complicated physiological event. The healing of broken tissue

is just like the most recent surgery. You know, it's very complicated. I could never figure it out the you know, how to deal with myself to direct all those growth hormones and immune immune system and the protein and amino acids and you know, all the stuff that has to happen. It's pretty complicated. Probably, you know, maybe it's too complicated for some of these modern supercomputers. It's an amazingly complex phenomenon. So you know, I have my responsibility to keep it clean, but 99.99% of the work is something that's innate in the human, perfect of the body's nature. When things are working relatively well, the nature of the body is to give yourself healing. Is there something comparable in the mind or the heart is the heart or the mind, have a self healing movement? Or in Buddhism, Buddhist terms, does it have a self liberating movement. And if you don't believe in that, if you believe that there's no innate movement towards spiritual healing or psychological healing or movement towards liberation, then you would probably have a spiritual teaching. It puts the emphasis on a lot of effort, a lot of diligent effort. Some people will just kind of you will put very strong emphasis on the importance of being vigilant and being a Look out for all the different defilements all the different kind of unhealthy movements of the mind to keep them at bay to stop them to, to prevent them from operating. It's all about self control, self restraint, that kind of language becomes really strong, developing strength. If you do believe in some innate movement towards psychological healing or spiritual liberation or something, then the language of it's up to me or the other is not going to be as strong and rather the language language of letting go become strong, letting go we can get out of the way so they can operate. And this is not necessarily the Buddhist dichotomy because if you read the very famous, most famous books of American psychology, the varieties of religious experience by by William James Wright, he makes this distinction as well and talks about the people You'd have to have a positive view of human nature to teach the teachers the practices of letting go that go into it. And I've certainly seen in myself over and over again, movements like that were somehow I can't take responsibility

for the inner psychological healing or movement that happens. Sometimes I'm surprised just like with the assault on you know, there it is. Sometimes I've been boom, you know, oh my god. I didn't know that about myself. Suddenly, this goes for all i didn't know this was doing that kind of behavior. I didn't know what those consequences are and you know, some aspect of myself was not so healthy. Certainly just kind of word warning kind of hits me like a truck that's happened. What set that up? What are the conditions that allowed that to happen, that revelation to happen? And I've had the opposite happened where you know, Quite often in meditation, for example, where I have to do my effort to keep the wound clean, be present, and not irritated anymore. But then I can, I've watched various things be healed, move through me settled, relaxed, even something like getting concentrated. You find some Buddhist teachers who emphasize that you you're responsible for your concentration, you have to make your effort, it's up to you. And I found it for myself, it might be well true for them, I find for myself, that concentration is not something I have a lot of control over. I can I create the conditions for concentration. And then sometimes I get concentrated and sometimes I don't, like you know, I create the conditions for healing the cut, and imagine sometimes it doesn't heal. So but and so you get a depth over time with creating the right conditions. And, and then over and over again, you know, I set these conditions up and then some point Something seems to shift inside me. And oh, that shift happens. That's not exactly like I'm doing it. Something inside of me is allowed to move and develop. Same thing with the movement of both feeling of being really still in meditation, letting go letting go thoughts, letting go of concerns and preoccupations, settling, letting go. I found repeatedly that as I like, go more deeply, I tend to feel more more peaceful, more still more quiet. And then really beautiful parts of who I seem to have a chance to come up. And I've known parts of their parts of myself I didn't know about but I already discovered through meditation practice, by having this deep letting go and simplicity of mine that allowed for something quiet or subtler, but also for quite profound to show it so. One of those things, for me was loving kindness, practice the limitless of loving kindness of love. I was not at all interested in loving kindness practice when I was introduced to Buddhism. And when I came around

circles in Buddhism where they taught loving kindness practice to teachers who do guided loving kindness meditation, I would tune them out. I came from a Zen tradition before and Zen was tough, you know, just give me the absolute and, you know, love stuff was kind of sappy. And, and so, I just turned it teachers out, ignore the whole loving kindness spirit, until my mind became still enough, a lot of letting go. But to release a lot of the armor of the heart, the tensions the, you know, subtly away. And lo and behold, bubbling up in my heart became this really strong, powerful sense of loving kindness. I wasn't trying to make it happen, wasn't like I was willing, or training myself to happen. It just kind of, you know, as my heart became more tenderized, that's what came up that's wrong. So, with those kinds of experiences, it would be easy for me to say perhaps, oh, there's this beautiful Buddha nature inside of us. This is an innate movement towards liberation within us. The human nature, its essence, this is beautiful things and moves towards healing towards liberation to freedom, even the movement towards the very deep, letting go of spiritual liberation Buddhism, classically understood in Buddhism that you can't make it happen yourself. You can go only so far yourself at some point, there has to be some other things, something else operating some deep insight or some deep letting go that you can't exactly orchestrate yourself. And so they have some experience like that. There's some very deep transformation that you can't take credit for lends itself to do there's something really beautiful, beautiful human nature in its essence is really beautiful. We give it a chance. However, There's also moral nature. And I've been in situations where, you know, we're given the right conditions there's an eighth impulses

that I don't take, don't want to take credit for. rather not take credit for that, you know, embarrassed to tell you about, you know, you know, and, and so for it means, for example, in my ambition to do a lot in one day, I might get scheduled myself really tight. And then I get, you know, a little bit harried with, you know, back, get behind my schedule and driving around. And with a really tight schedule, that's, that can be the condition for me to get irritated with other drivers. That you know, set up those conditions, if I set up the conditions to actually make space in my schedule, so I can get there you know, make a lot of space so that they Always schedule my schedule enough time to get there early. Then all the drivers are beautiful. Regardless, they cut me off. And so some people that conditions of their social life, the family life, the world around them have been awful. And they live under tremendous stress, abuse, trauma. And those can be the conditions for impulses, sometimes self protective and forces sometimes coping impulses that end up looking quite ugly, quite dangerous to themselves and to other people. Because within us, there's, you know, all kinds of impulses. There's impulses towards love, and there's impulses to hate. There's impulses towards generosity, and there's impulses towards Greed miserliness there's something. There's the impulses towards delusion, there's impulses to wisdom insight. So you're gonna have to get to my view of human nature, as it is right now. If we're going to use language like Buddha nature, and I think we should use language like Mara nature, I don't like using language of our nature. So maybe we don't have to maybe have to use the language of Buddha nature either. We could have to use either one. The Buddha didn't use either one. He did a whole, you know, whole religious teachings within it without kind of pointing this as the true nature of who we are. But rather to recognize that within us, there are forces that come with being human beings. And impulses, patterns develop, you know, things that can happen and which are those impulses get the upper hand has really big consequences. And so maybe we can't take responsibility ultimate responsibility. In some way we can issue responsibilities important one. But I think I think what we can do, and this is where we are responsible is what are the conditions we put into place, we can put, we can decide which direction we want our life to go in. And then we can try to put together the best conditions to try to make it possible for a certain thing to happen. If you want to heal your cut, you keep the cut clean. If what you want is infection, then you keep the cut dirty. You know, it's pretty easy. So it's pretty complicated biological event again, infection as well. So, you know, we don't take responsibility for actually getting it consumed. Except that we create the conditions for it. Same thing for a heart. Do we create the

conditions? What are the conditions we're creating the conditions we create effect what how the heart develops with impulses with development with evolution happens within their own heart. And maybe we can't take ultimate responsibility in the sense that we're the ones doing it and making it happen, we can take responsibility for making sure the right conditions are there. So, Buddhism, you know, encourages a lot of different putting into place conditions. One of them is precepts, living by the precepts living an ethical way, that tends to put together conditions that minimize the degree of suffering that we're going to have and other people are going to have, but also minimize the tendency towards certain kinds of impulses getting the upper hand and encouraged you know, more beneficial beautiful qualities getting the apprehend Living a life which is having medic meditation as part of your life is one of those conditions that can be very helpful. Meditation is very inefficient for most people.

And I like to think that spiritual life is very inefficient. And in people who want things, you know, right away, you know, instant enlightenment, they want to see the results right away. That it's very inefficient. So there's a story of a Zen monk from a young Shoemaker cake both successful young man came to come to the Zen monastery, intelligent, capable many ways. And he's on fire to give us the habit. How long are the practice here until I get enlightened. And the evidence Oh, probably about 10 years. Oh, but you know, I'm bright and capable. I really apply myself I work really hard, diligently. have just do everything you know, quickly Well, we are throwing went to high school in one year in college and a year and a half. And, you know, I just really couldn't quite know how to apply myself and the habits at all Well, in that case it should take 20 years.

So I believe in the teachings of the Buddha, he would not say that human nature was one way or the other. He would recognize that human nature is of mixed tag and then and variety of impulses. But then we need to take responsibility for the conditions that allow the growth of those impulses or those movements within us which are to our benefit and the benefit of others. And if you do that, My hope is you discover that within you, there is a movement in innate movement towards liberation and freedom. That is self liberating movement. And some people will experience that's a sense of itself that really movement as a strong desire, a yearning, as intimation of the possibility that is all of our, hopefully something we can all have. And the question is, when we sense the possibility of feel like yearning or that movement or that sense of gravity, gravitational pull, towards liberation, to re listen to it or not, to allow for the conditions for it to happen not or do we go back to watching YouTube, television or whatever else we might do. So, I hope that was stimulating enough that the You'll think about this, your relationship to the topic of human nature. And perhaps this is an interesting topic to discuss with your friends and ask them what they think and explore it. I didn't offer my views here today as a definitive statement about this topic, but rather, my really hope was to get you to think about your own views. And as you do that, try to reflect on how your own views whether they're conscious or subconscious, at this point, try to kind of unravel what you really believe. are your views. The views you have limit you or did they make open the possibilities for something really beautiful to happen for you? Thank you