

2020-09-27 The Buddha as an Activist

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SPEAKERS

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So again, good morning, and I hear Sunday morning at IMC in California. And good day to those of you who are in other places around the globe. What I'd like to talk about today is maybe a little bit experimental, it's more of a continuation of reflections that I've been having. And maybe its way of continuing to think out loud around this. And that is that we all know that there's a tremendous amount of social division and discord that exists in our society from the world, but especially in here in the United States, especially now with the election. season in full swing. And for some of us, it's more animosity, intention in society, and hostility than it's been for over 40 years. During the Vietnam War time, and right afterwards, that time was pretty bad here in this country.

So here, it's gonna go through cycles of this. And one of the questions then this is what reflection is, is what's the role of a Buddhist center, or a Buddhist practice or Buddhist teachers in these kind of social times of social discord and conflict and, and, and one of the principles that has characterized much of the insight meditation movement from the time it started, and, and also part of IMC is to attempt to some degree, to be politically neutral. So that all political persuasions feel comfortable here to practice with the idea that meditation practice is very profound and significant, and it transforms people into better citizens, and better able to live in society in peaceful ways, harmonious ways, generous ways.

And so, you know, it benefits people who are suffering. And so we want that benefit to be available to people freely to all people, anybody, any kind of everyone, everyone to feel welcome to come here and practice. And so we've made some decisions about staying relatively neutral and can be argued that maybe we went too far, perhaps but member, for example, and during the Iraq War in 2002, I guess it began 2001 2002, that somebody put a sign up on the window at IMC saying No War in Iraq. And so it was taken down. Because there are people who come, you know, there was a divided country back then there were people who believed it was appropriate to go to war. And we wanted everyone to come who felt who wanted to practice and not to feel like they were challenged to come

because they were, you know, their persuasion was not appreciated. And certainly in the insight meditation movement, I've talked to a number of people who have been republicans in this predominantly liberal scene, insight scene, but they feel like it's very challenging for them to come and practice here because if they tell people what their persuasion is, there's sometimes quite a hostility towards them. So they just stay quiet about that.

So how neutral should we be? And how neutral are we should put, should we be politically with political positions, political, social action, and things like that? is an open question. And friend of mine is a Buddhist teacher wanted to make a line between being involved in politics, issues, political issues, as a Buddhist teacher, versus being involved in issues of civil rights, or human rights or social justice, that for him, there was a line between them, where civil rights social justice, he sees a little bit more outside the realm of politics. And, and so that's okay, to be involved there and take a position there. And that's an interesting, you know, point of view.

And so I'm trying to find my way with this also, where's the line? Where do we, where is it too political for us? And we shouldn't be that political. And what is being too neutral and where is that line? What where do we stand up and, and are involved in things. And, you know, it's, maybe once Buddhism is in this country for a lot longer. It'll be just like, Christianity, there'll be Buddhist centers that are identified really clearly and overtly with liberal positions and ones that are vertically recognized with maybe more conservative orientations. And, and there's a little bit of that's beginning happening. But But you know, so where are we and IMC and where do we fit with this? So that's kind of the background for my reflections and what I've been thinking about lately. And so I went into the ancient texts, the suttas to see what we could read about there and might help understand Buddhist perspective on these things. And so this talk is titled, The Buddha as an activist. And, and it was clear, so if the Buddha, if an activist is someone who promotes a social reform of some kind of other, then the Buddha was an activist, because he was explicitly trying to affect the whole world to benefit the whole world. He advocated for the welfare, happiness and well being of the whole world. And, but more importantly, in terms of being an activist, I think, he encouraged his followers, his disciples, to also go out and work for the welfare of many people for the welfare of the whole world. So this idea that it's not as simply sit in meditation, and don't do anything. And, and go into the forest and be a hermit. But there was an explicit instructions to go out and benefit the world. And in some ways, the highest benefit from a traditional Buddhist point of view, is to teach a path of liberation. But is it limited to that, that is always not involved in politics are not involved in social issues at the time.

So we have to remember the Buddha lived a long time ago, he lived in the Bronze Age, when I ever I know I'm right, reminded he'd lived in the Bronze Age. I think that, you know, I think, wow, that's such a different time than where we are today. And it was a preliterate culture. And, and it was mostly agrarian society. They think it around the time of the Buddha was just the beginning of urban centers where there was merchants and craftspeople who were doing a trade. And, and so it was a society where there were no newspapers, there was no Facebook, there was no, you know, mass communication.

And most people's relationships, were with people they had face to face contact with. And, and it was there that the Buddha addressed issues. He couldn't really address elections, there were no elections in most of the countries he lived in. He couldn't, you know, advocate for legislation and new laws, because laws were just the whim of the king. And if you somehow cross the king, it was, could easily have been lethal to make the king angry. And there's no real economic systems institutions, to change to advocate for different economic theories for how society should be organized. You know, it was very rudimentary and, and there was no institutions to approach except, again, the king, and, and so there was very little work where activism works in the modern world, there wasn't those channels, there wasn't those places to go and try to make change in our society. That but instead of legislative, political, economic activism, the Buddha focused on changing how people treated each other. So I think of it as kind of activism in ethics, ethical activism.

And this he put a tremendous amount of effort into. And he frequently emphasis advocated for people to not to harm each other. In fact, this idea of not harming each other could is really at the over and over again at the heart of what the Buddha was trying to teach that the, the path of practice meditation is really a private practice of not harming ourselves. But in learning to do that, also know coming to a place of not harming the world around us. A person who became noble, a noble person, one of the titles for someone whose some degree of enlightenment is described as someone who would not harm anyone at all. So this idea of living a harmless life is very important for him.

But what made his act, what made his efforts to do this? A form of activism in my point of understanding is it isn't he didn't just do it for himself, he didn't himself go out and advocate for people to live ethical harm free lives. He strongly advocated that his followers do that as well, that his followers go out and promote prompt ethical behavior, support and encourage that for our society. So in that sense, he was trying to do more than just give teachings to the people he was directly encountering, he was trying to have a wider influence on society of his time. And that is where the Buddha was an activist. So one way of seeing this is a, I think we're teaching where this is explicit is, the Buddha taught often, that people should avoid the 10 unskillful or unwholesome unethical actions. And instead, they should do due to 10, skillful, ethical, wholesome actions. And so here's one set of teachings where he says that the 10 unseen unethical behaviors tell you what they are in a minute, that they are. They're harmful. But what's worse than harmful is what he's going to explain. And then he says abstaining from these on ethical behaviors, is beautiful. And the word kalyana overlaps with the word ethical, but it literally means beautiful. So it's kind of a more of a different flavor than just saying, immoral and unethical, and a beautiful, beautiful. So abstaining from these 10, unhealthy actions is beautiful. And then he says, and then there's something that's more than beautiful.

So then he gives the teachings so he says that 10 unskillful, unethical actions are killing, taking what is not given stealing, sexual misconduct. Lying, Speaker speaking divisive speech, harsh speech, frivolous or pointless chatter, having ill will, being covetous and having something called wrong view. Wrong understanding. So those those 10. But what's worse than those doing those things, killing,

stealing, so forth. What's worst is to encourage others to do so as well. Now, what's beautiful, is to abstain from all of those. What's better than beautiful, more beautiful transcends beauty is to encourage others. Actually, the word is not encourage. The word literally is more like to prompt others, to abstain from these unethical behaviors. And it doesn't take a lot of reflection to think about that. What we have happening in our society and political social levels, is the expression of tremendous amount of some version number 10. Some aspects of some of these 10s unskillful actions. But what's interesting here, I find very interesting, he says, people we should prompt others to live ethically, he doesn't is not an instructions to oppose others, in terms of their ethics, oppose those who are unethical, but rather motivate them to be ethical. Now, that is a challenging thing to do. Sometimes it can seem a lot easier to oppose people. And if we save, you know, post people, we can defeat them oppose people, we can stop them, oppose people we can, you know, but the danger with opposition is that people even if people do stop, they might be angry, they might be more upset. And it becomes building a pressure of an angry society if it's just a matter of winning and losing. And, and so is there is there another option and so, maybe that other option of that is, is much more difficult. To figure out a way that's not oppositional, however, it might have longer benefits in the long term to avoid having winners and losers.

Now, one of the places you see the Buddha emphasize this non oppositional approach to how he sees his activism is what he was trying to promote, is that one of the 10 unskillful actions is divisive speech. And he says that, when people are engaged in divisive speech, there are such people who try to create a vision and perpetuate the divisions that are already there. And, and they love factional factionalism, they their expression is, they love factionalism, they delight in factionalism, they enjoy factionalism. And they speak to create factions, you know, partisan positions, real separations and us versus them. However, for those people who abstain from divisive speech, what the speech they engage in, is, they do speech that unites those who are divided, and, and, and supports those who are already united. So they unite those who are divided, support those who are already united, and speak in such ways as to create harmony. So that was his instruction. So really, to find a way to avoid division. And if that becomes at the heart of this activism, it creates a very particular flavor, not only to what's being taught, but also how it's being done. Because you can't really create opposition and divide if what you're trying to do is to create harmony. And but if we're trying to get people to stop killing, and stealing, and all your institutions or governments to stop all these unethical behaviors, politicians to stop involved in violence and taking what's not given and sexual misconduct and lying and divisive speech, harsh speech, pointless speech, ill will covetousness if you try to avoid all these things. You know, how do we do that, in ways that avoid creating opposition. The Buddhist when he's talking to his monastics, he said to the monks and nuns, that they should act for the welfare of many people, for the happiness of many people, for the benefit, welfare and happiness of many people. So it's kind of repetitive, but it's really making this point to really go help people work for their benefit. And they should do that in three ways. They should prompt others in physical acts of concord. They should prompt others in verbal acts of concord. And they should prompt others in mental acts of concord to create unity concord community community. So here we see this emphasis again, on Concord.

So that's what he said to monastics, maybe for kings. He's a little bit hard in the ancient world, maybe to advocate with kings to change their ways of slightest whim that kings could, you know, kill a person back then they did. But what the Buddha did was, he told stories, he was a great storyteller. And some of them these stories might be considered myths in our work, and our kind of modern kind of understanding. And, and he tells me told the myth about the ancient King, ancient kings and how kings lived. And he said that, that if there's poverty, if people are poor, the king should provide them with means with support. And then if they don't do that, then this myth is a story of King who didn't do this. Then poverty will spread. And if poverty spread, people will steal, too just to be able to eat and have food. And if then the king uses violence to punish people. This will only spread violence through the kingdom as well. And then more and more violence more and more factionalism or more conflict, and the conflict spreads not only between all the different powers in society, but also within families and, and things can get pretty ugly.

So he uses myth to make this story. And, and you know, when I first read about these Buddhist myths, I kind of didn't think too much about them. But when I think that I can add on oral culture before there was literature and all these different things, that it was through speech, that was memorable, that ideas spread through society. And these stories like myth, like stories, they kind of function like the Facebook of the ancient world. And if you had a good story, people would tell it and retell it. And if that story was one that promoted ethics, care for other people, avoiding divisions, avoiding factionalism, avoiding violence, that was one way maybe to change minds, in a kind of a bit around about way or rather than, you know, coming up to the king and, you know, protesting directly. That one of the interesting things I see in this ancient teaching, is that in being an activist in speaking up and trying to encourage people to be ethical, it's the activist does not sacrifice their own ethical or wholesome behavior, and working to end unethical behavior and others. In other words, you can't be unethical to promote ethics. And and, and so we see that little bit in some of the, the Buddhist instructions around some of the 10, skillful or ethical behaviors that he promoted these things includes that one should never be hostile, even privately, one's own thoughts. But instead, one would wish to be others to be to be free from animosity, oppression, anxiety, and for them to live at ease. So when we really come from a place of goodwill, in doing what we're doing, this is kind of a high standard that the Buddha has about any kind of behavior in relationship to other people to do not have hostility, and to speak, in words. So instead of speaking, frivolous talk that the Buddha said, when should speak at the right time, and do so with words which are treasured, reasoned, defined and beneficial. In terms of not killing, the Buddha said that, you know, one shouldn't kill, but he added to that, the positive side of that was, he said, we should encourage or prompt other people to put down their weapons. So not just get them to stop to kill, but to put down the weapons that you know, back then the Bronze Age, that was swords and spears and arrows and things like that, in addition, in abstaining from killing, one should also be gentle and kind, and caring for the welfare of all living beings. So we find a kind of a trend or a kind of a flavor in the Buddhist ethical teaching, you encouraged people to be ethical, he encouraged people to support and encourage prompt others to be ethical, a difficult task. Very difficult. How do you

change people, so they want to so they're motivated to be ethical, that's the that's the goal. And I don't have an easy answer to that. But what a great goal that is, and, and so to be unethical or be oppositional to people, doesn't really work. So what works what makes a difference for people? I wonder if stories make a difference. The Buddha told the myths, that people have evoke people's imagination, of oak people's story mind which so often goes deeper into people imagination into the hearts, then just, you know, protesting and this so the Buddhist idea, as challenging as all this is, the Buddha's approach to what I'm calling activism is rooted in one of the main principles main purposes of the whole teaching. And that is in addition to not harming it's or in order to not to harm is to be free from greed, hatred and delusion. The Buddha emphasized we should constantly be working to others. Greed, hate and delusion within us.

And if we uproot greed, hate and delusion within us, then the way we act in the world would also be act speak and think, in the world would also be free from greed, hate and delusion. And, and so this is such an important part of Buddhist practice, to become free of greed, hate and delusion, that if we want to be activists, if you want to make a change in our society, and politics and economics, I think it's becomes sooner or later, it becomes quite a natural thing, or quite a devoted thing for Buddhist practitioners to do it, free of greed, hatred and delusion. Because that's what they're working to cleanse themselves from a free themselves from, they wanted to be liberated from, but not a retired liberation, but then to bring that non greed, non hatred, non delusion, to step into the world and make a difference.

So how does all this then translate to the modern world to us here, IMC or around this country? And I'm little bit self conscious and talking about this, because it seems simplistic, it seems like it's too idealistic, too challenging to make the real difference that we've any of us would hope to see. And there's, you know, all kinds of arguments being made. Why, you know, this kind of more nonviolent effort can't work. And so, you know, we have to do some version of violence, or some version of hostility or some version of being really oppositional and really confrontational or something. But I think the task for Buddhists certainly can be to advocate for the end of systems, institutions, and politicians, who engage in some or all of the 10, unhealthy, unethical behaviors. And but such adverse advocacy, I think, aims to create bridges, not to break bridges down. That because of its strong emphasis on creating concord and unity and healing divides, is there a way of advocating strongly and powerfully in a way that doesn't perpetuate divides? How do we step in and create bridges for the common good? Can we try to bring people together to work together for the common good, free of factionalism. So as I said, doing such activism is neither easy nor fast. It requires strong confidence in the value of the kind of ethical behavior, the Buddha emphasized, strong confidence in the value of staying free of hatred, greed, and delusion, free of strong confidence in avoiding violence, not just physical violence, but there's also kind of verbal violence and different kinds or verbal, you know, strategies, political strategies that are imposing the one's will onto others, which is kind of violent. It's an activism that aims to change the psychological foundation to which a net from which unethical behavior arises. And so regardless of how we idealistic this whole approach is, is working to establish

generosity, love and wisdom, as the foundation for society. So that fear is no longer the foundation. So I don't really answer the question I began with, but it's the you know, what is where where's the line between stepping up into the public sphere politics and society and taking a stand and, and where and how do we do it? And where's the line rule? We don't we get too political.

And maybe one way to answer that question is, maybe there's no alternative to protesting. Maybe protesting is too oppositional. But maybe there's another way, that is not a protest, but maybe is more powerful. And maybe it's acts of powerful acts of presence, powerful acts of showing up in such a way that an alternative is being shown, that can't be ignored. Maybe rather than protests, there are there are demonstrations of love, demonstrations of kindness and support, that it's being demonstrated in such a powerful way that it touches people's hearts and minds and changes people or, or to so that they drop their hostility and forcefulness and division that exists. So that we can look for the third option, we can look for how we can work together for the common good look for options that can work for everyone, not just one party or the other.

That was my attempt at this topic, I feel inadequate in this topic. And so I want to say that, that it still remains a reflection finding a way with all this. And maybe some of you are also looking finding your way. And if you were looking towards Buddhism for leadership in this regard, or what would Buddhists do? Certainly, I've presented the Buddhist point of view and have very, hopefully clear away that we would, whatever we do, we would be ethical. And we would prompt, figure out ways to motivate others to be ethical as well. And you can't motivate people in a healthy way by threatening them or opposing them. So how do we do that? How do we become friends with people in such a way we touch their hearts and to change change something?

So this will be an ongoing question for me and ongoing question for maybe some of you and for our society. And hopefully we will not only find a way with it, but I hope we make a difference for the world. So the world becomes a better place and a friendlier place for everyone concerned. May all beings become each other's friends. Thank you