

2003-09-29 Satipatthana Sutta (Week 5)

Charnel Ground Meditation

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SPEAKERS

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So what I'm doing these Mondays for a while now is slowly going through the different exercises of mindfulness, different practices of mindfulness that's given in the Satipatthana Sutta, the discourse in the foundation of mindfulness on establishing mindfulness that the Buddha gave. And there's something like I haven't had to count again, because I'm a little bit confused about how to count because of, but anyway, there's something like 19 exercises given in the text. And it's a source for the kind of mindfulness practice we do here, this text. So it's a kind of a derived source because over the centuries, the practice has evolved somewhat and developed. And so rather than taking it directly from here, the practice we do at IMC, it's more kind of evolved from this core text, but it really people over and over again over and over again to go back to this text. This particular discourse for inspiration for guidance into practice. And it's kind of like the standard or the reference for how to do Vipassana practice. And some people are quite surprised to learn what some of the exercises are. Because if they've been in particular traditions would be passing in like an IMC with Glencoe or different places, they tend to choose certain sections or certain aspects of the text and emphasize those. So, the in our tradition that we you know, IMC as part of, it tends to be more kind of mindfulness that is nonreactive and non evaluative, where you wouldn't kind of engage and try to manipulate your experience. You just let your experience be as it is. And some people think that's what mindfulness is, just be aware of your experience or your experiences and leave it alone. But some of the, some of this practice here is actually quite involved. And actually, not only you know it does, does involve a little bit changing your experience. Some of it involves more than just being aware of things as they are. But being aware of things a particular way, it's got particular focus. In particular, the next one is sometimes the biggest surprised What's this doing here? I was thinking of doing show Intel as a way or something as a way of kind of, you know, kind of illustrating this section and we have at home in our lawn, this metal bucket full of bones and vertebrae, and they're, they're soaking because they're still kind of like, you know, meat and stuff on it, or something like that. My wife's a botanist, and she does field

psychologists use field work out on some of the open space districts in on the peninsula. And she came back last Friday or some point Monday, recently, with all these bones that day. And in the verse debray Long, long vertebrae and still carrying together kind of, I thought I haven't having here in the bucket, you know? And maybe some of you wouldn't have known what kind of vertebrae was, you know, kind of spilling over from this bucket. And, but I didn't. Anyway, the this particular exercise is, it's called it's the nine charnel ground contemplations. So this involves going to a charnel ground. Now in ancient India, apparently, they didn't bury people that commonly they do have the custom of burning people. I don't know when they started doing that and there's still people that get burned in India to this day, you can go down to Varanasi and the burning docks there and, and watch the bodies being burnt. Sometimes bodies are thrown into the rivers and you can also take the ferry boat, boat robots out into the river and At the Ganges in Varanasi, and you know he's a little rowboat, you're out there a little rowboat and you kind of look over the edge and there's a body that's floating by. It goes so certain that's one way of disposing bodies as you put them, just put them in the river and let them kind of river take them. And, and then Tibet, there's the practice of feeding corpses to I guess the vultures. So they grew up in these high mountain places, and I've seen photographs and movies, I forget what it is now. I guess it's people's whose job is to cut up the flesh At first, I thought when I heard about this, he just left the body up there naked here. And the birds would come down and take care of it. But apparently they take this flight like they cut off the flesh. And so that's easy for the birds to get it clean, clean the bones quickly. And, and I think my understanding part of the reason why they do this and in Tibet is that it's difficult to bury people in the very high mountains of Tibet, the soils not so deep and it's a lot of work to do that. So, this is a way of kind of cleanly disposing of the corpse in the body and returning it to nature in a way. And so, in, at least in the ancient times in India, one of the customs was, that is charnel grounds where sometimes they just bring the bodies out there and leave them there in the trial ground on on the surface of the ground, they wouldn't bury them. And so then the local animals would come and whatever calm and slowly do their thing or the body would just sit there for a while and get bloated and do all kinds of interesting things that corpses do. And it'd be this place you could do that and in Thailand, they have places where they burn corpses, they still burn them outdoors, apparently, and at least they did until very recently. And some, some some anyway, so you can go and see these places. You can go and hang out there at these places. They burn the bodies and sometimes you leave the bodies there. attended Bezier kind of smoldering, you know the last stages of their burning. So this is about charnel, ground contemplation going about contemplation and mindfulness established through the idea of a charnel ground. So bear with me. I know it's gruesome. And some of you are wondering why did I come tonight? And some of you who might be brand new to Buddhism and to Buddhist meditation, how what am I got myself involved in here? I just thought, you know, stress reduction misses the people. This is the people who love to do loving kindness meditation. And so here says, again, because Vickers is the word for a monk. But the commentaries make it explicit. That means anybody who's a serious practitioner, again, because as though when we're to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel Round, one, two or three days dead, bloated, livid and losing matter. A Baker compares this same body with us like this, this body to is of the same nature, it will be like that it is not exempt from that fate. In this way, he or she abides contemplating the body as a body internally, externally, and both internally and externally, and he or she abides independent, not clinging

to anything in the world. That to is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body. Again, as though one were to see a corpse thrown aside and a charnel ground being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals are various kinds of worms. Beco compares this same body with us. This body too is of the same nature. It will be like that. It is not actually From that fate in this way, he or she abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body. Again, as though one were to see a corpse thrown aside and a charnel ground, a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together with science scientists sinews, seniors seniors, of fleshless skeleton smeared with blood held together but with sin sinews, a skeleton without flesh and blood held together with seniors or disconnected bones scattered in all directions. here and then bone, their foot bone here a shin bone, there a thigh bone here a hip bone, there a backbone here a rib bone, there a breast bone, here an arm bone, their shoulder bone here a neck bone, their jaw bone here a tooth their skull Bhiku compares this same body with us, this body to is of the same name. It will be like that it is not exempt from that fate. Again, as though one were to see a corpse thrown aside and the charnel ground, bones bleached white, the color of shells, bones heaped up, more than a year old bones rotted and crumble to dust. A Baker compares this same body with it thus, this body to is of the same nature, it will be like that it is not exempt from that nature. And this way, when a buyer is independent, not clinging to anything in the world, and that too is how Bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body. So I don't know how easy it is to go to a charnel ground anymore, but I do you know that this is a practice. That's insane fired. Many people in Asia and Southeast Asia monks particularly, to do something comparable when some monks will have will get photographs of dead bodies, sometimes bodies that have somehow been in states of decay or sometimes corpses that have people injured injured pretty dramatically from like automobile accidents. And they'll have those pictures of those bodies in their, in their bedroom on their walls. Once I sent a book, and I sent something I present to an Abbot in Thailand, an American Canadian ordain the Thai tradition been there for 2025 30 years, I don't know. And was an Abbot of the monastery, thriving monastery. I said and he sent me a very nice thank you card letter back. It was lovely to get this very warm and very friendly. And you know, and then as as kind of a gesture of kind of generosity in return. He sent me a gift. And in the envelope was a photograph of a partially burned corpse. And then some people work.

And then

they have in Bangkok they have a forensic museum. And that is near near the I don't know what to be called the medical museum. And I was going to try to go to the medical museum where they show all these body parts and stuff. But I ended up in the forensic museum where they show body parts but then they have knife stuck in them and bullet holes and, and all these interesting stuff. And, but obviously, I wasn't you know, I had heard that it was a practice of spending time with corpses and you know, doing his thing. With a charnel ground based on this thing, so it's still it's still something that people try to do in their own ways, this particular practice, I've thought of taking students from our from our group and maybe taking them to if we can get access, maybe to Stanford Medical Center and visit the anatomy class there and spend some time with a corpse. So it's not just a practice that's talked about in ancient texts, but it's still done to some degree in modern Buddhism. And the ultimate function

of this, it says is to develop the will become independent, not clinging to anything in the world, which is another kind of way of saying become free. So now we'll ask you, yes.

Practice

if you wish to get

an intimate Sangha. So,

what happens to buy

this this body two is of the same nature, it will be like that it is not exempt from that fate So, now the question is for you so, you know, I realize is you know is for a very foreign to many of you and maybe gruesome and wondering, you know what places has in a spiritual tradition and Buddhist practice. But I'd like to ask you why do you think this is in in, in Buddhist Why is considered a Buddhist practice and why it would be included in instructions on establishing mindfulness establishing a way of helping helping one bring a mindful presence. To this life that we live, what is it? What's the value of this? Yes, Mark

is to see

a teenager.

years old, I just couldn't imagine life like that. And now it's

way past myself, but it's still like, you know, people in nursing homes I still have trouble connecting with pets

is getting easier. But

you know, the whole truth about impermanence is something that really takes a lot of practice on focus to get to really know.

Thank you. Yes,

I think it's coming face to face with a fear

So coming face to face with a fear of death, right? Yes.

we've ever talked about being around people as they die. And it's not as gruesome here but it does get

spent dying? No, I don't think so. I mean, there are there are there are there are stories of when. I don't know if that Buddha but certainly stories of of monks who are with people and counseling people as they were dying. There was one most famous one I know of was, I think it was Shari puja was counseling some man who was dying and giving some kind of practice to do while he was dying. And afterwards he went to the Buddha and told them what he did and the Buddha reprimanded him and said, Oh, you gave them the wrong practice. This man had the opportunity to get enlightened if you'd give them in a practice leads to enlightenment. And he said he gave him a practice that led to rebirth in the heavenly realms. Yes.

I could visualize very vividly what you're talking about. And it became very clear to me that I was not in the body. The soul is something else.

That was quite surprising.

So a, so there's kind of a peacefulness or reassurance it sets in when a person no longer identifies with a body thing. The body is who I am. Right. Right. Yes.

Also, the other thing I think, is times of the essence

To put things in perspective and, and the time is of the essence, because you never know when it's gonna happen. Yes.

It really goes to the heart of why we spend so much of our time with our minds in the future worrying about what's going to happen next, our minds in the past about what's happening. This meditation is reading this the other day

allows you to no matter what you do in the future, this is what's going to happen to all of us. So focus on the present focus on the permanence, focus on the

future so

I suspect a lot of people will find themselves very present if they walk through a charnel ground. Also,

a book that's come out recently about a woman photographer camera, the name is taking pictures of there's a site where they follow the decay of bodies. And I've just ordered it. I haven't done anything yet. It's kind of a, an artwork. Look at all of this.

I was just going to say, there are a few people that are at the, you know, what do you call it? I feel like coming to the end of the circle of life, and if there is an affair out there, I've seen it. I've had my mother and my father both die before me and it's so peaceful, that that's there's no fear. And I think what this does is just cemented in the reason that I've gotten into this this late in my life is that the most important thing in the world is right now and I know perfectly well. I've got good health and all in That's very precious. And I feel very grateful. So that's my concentration and whatever the body in a way it might be better to recycle them.

Maybe they've got the right idea.

So the most important so this kind of contemplation reinforces this, the net right now is the most important time. And that is for our body with population growth and all that there is better to recycle it. And there's an image of grit is a movement of green green burial, which involves no formaldehyde and just putting the body in simple cardboard casket or pine casket and letting it decompose someplace. So it goes back and it's kind of nice because you know, someone has said the body is made up of, it's just made up of recycled materials. Anyway. And then just to take off a little bit on what you said that present moment is the most important from a certain analysis that Buddhism offers. The present moment than the now present is the only thing that's real. And so if you want to be connected to what's real, you would be connected to what's present.

Exercising compassion,

compassion.

Compassion for myself

is to look at the nature and

the immediacy of that

if you are present, there is no other response. Compassion can't stay there without a certain degree of loving and it's

Compassion is loving, accepting and a sense of our shared humanity in that situation. Thank you

help and what

you could do contemplation of

death, looking

at a very peaceful and beautiful part of

the Buddha was really gruesome.

In today's context,

in essence, you know how far to

take care of your body.

Thank you.

Practice It's not like that but similar. I picked out where I want my ashes to be scattered, which is the lines taking off incense and Tony wrote all the way at the end. And I walk out there once a week and I said, wear a coat my ashes will be.

I'm rethinking it because I might like one of them might want to donate organs.

So she says she her practice is similar. I mean, her way of doing this is she has, until recently she thought she would cremate her body and have the ashes spread out in the bay beyond the baselines there where she goes for a walk once a week. So once a week, she gets a chance to go and look and see where her ashes are going to go. Some people will go and sit that have if they have a grave site that that they know it's been the plots of place that's been planned. They'll go visit that plot periodically, and they'll have this is where I'll rest. Similar, and I've heard of Catholic monks who would have kept the casket they're gonna be buried in in the room. You know, just reminder, it's always there. Yeah.

You know, I think the initial aversion

that arises when you see death or mayhem or gruesomeness, but, you know, teaching is also really, hopefully, if we really pay attention to it is

another aspect of interconnectedness.

That, as this gentleman said, we'll all be on yours,

some of us,

but based basing on the idea of interconnectedness, not just the idea of aversion, and confronting and so forth, but the underlying teaching as well as this, this is what connects Yeah.

Yeah. Beautiful. So this kind of Practice is also a practice that of interconnectedness, really interconnectedness with life and, and share with the bones, and Buddha Dasa, who was one of the greatest meditation masters in Thailand, in the last century, he died in old age, but his explicit instructions were to even had a forest monastery that he kind of spend most of the time outdoors and he had an outdoor kind of section where they did their chanting rather than indoor kind of, you know, all for worship. And, and he his instruction when he died, was that his body is just taken out into the woods there and just propped up against the tree and let nature take its course and partly to as a teaching, for this final teaching, about nature and how nature works. You know, it's all it's all nature. It's all natural part of the natural world. And rather than being horrified by it, to appreciate a natural aspect But he didn't get his wish. Because he was too famous. But he didn't he didn't get his wish, because he's too famous. It. So all these important people got involved in the head of really big state, cremation and everything because, yeah. basis

it seems every time I turn on my computer and log into AOL or something, there's a picture right there. And often it's a rather gruesome picture of some kind of violence.

And it's on television.

It seems like it's Some nights if I turn on the television every every one of the regular channels has some kind of cop show or detective program or more thing, and they all seem to have this body shot. And I understand that doing this practice is it's a way of focusing in a different way. Television but I'm just curious, you know in listening to this if, if there might be a way to use is to utilize what we have

right there and kind of the basis has

come to play.

Observing in a different way

Would you say what you said was great and it's the idea of using reality as it is as a contemplation of death. In our society often, you know, it's often been pointed out town, American society, it's often death is often hidden. You don't see we don't see it so much. It's kind of pretty often hidden. Whereas in other cultures, it's quite a public thing, death for various reasons. The first corpse I saw was when I was 11. And was not in America. It was in Nepal, where there was of course, being carried down to a river to someplace to get burned. And because you people are carrying the corpses stretcher and stupid corpses basically exposed and But you're saying, you know, there's lots of opportunities to contemplate death, because the media and you know, things like that. And I think it definitely can be

used as a contemplation. I think it's important to use it for something besides numbing out or getting insensitive or getting more afraid or more outraged. We have the opportunity here on this street corners to do this kind of contemplation on Thursday and Friday mornings. And those of you haven't been here we have planned parenthood is across the street, it seems that it seems that they do abortions there. And so there's an anti abortion protester who's there every Thursday, Friday morning, and I think it's a professional job he has, you know, it's, it's again, he gets a support for it from somewhere. And, and he has these very dramatic, vivid photographs of aborted babies, you know, big blown up posters. And so, one way one way to see that and take that is to think about that, you know, try to crack me up criticize a little bit for the moment what why that why it's there and what he's trying to do and just look at it and recognize that this is a nature also what death is like your comments also maybe you think that you know there's also a kind of tragic side to death and difficult side and you're going to see in the media for example and it's tragic that it's sometimes glorify death. It's tragic, what happens, you know, you encounter people have counted how many people get killed on television every night and you know, some astronomical numbers. If you watch two hours of television, you see 32 people get killed. And that's kind of tragic, that kind of input and then there's a tragedy of just the reality of the way people die sometimes in the violence in the world. I hope that it's rather than becoming numb or afraid. Angry becomes certainly something that generates compassion. And because compassion is empowering and compassion is something then becomes a source for acting and doing something to make a difference in the world. But certainly, I think this kind of meditation practice is meant not to be something to take us away from the world or numb out, we'd rather kind of wake up and be present in a very realistic way. One calm. Let's see. I'd like to make one more comment about the text that you might not have noticed, as I read it. It says here, each of these exercises the nine charnel ground exercises, again, because as though one were to see a corpse, and the expression as though and this in the tradition is sometimes interpreted to mean that it doesn't actually require going actually to the child ground and after sitting with a corpse, it's a visualization practice. you visualize this You sit in bed imagine this you're using your powers of imagination. And so that for some people, you know, puts a little bit different spin or context of what's actually the practices. So yes.

My daughter saying who spent

more to spare for medical students experience of really dealing with that person and cover up all the faces

personalized

so unless you were working on

the hands

This is seems seems odd. first thought it seems odd to treat someone like that or Not to really confronted the other hand, I know that sometimes medical school is so intense overall, maybe anything to reduce the intensity is helpful. The when I was a freshman in college, I took a drawing class. And halfway through the quarter, this is a UC Davis. Now UC Santa Barbara, the professor took us twice, twice during one week to the anatomy lab. And they rolled out George and, and there was no nothing. He was, you know, nothing was covering any part of him. And, and that the idea was we're supposed to draw him. And he reasonably gave to us for that exercise was that his students always drew a lot stronger after that. He was and so they went twice the two days and three hours each time to draw and the first time I went, I do the foot Because the foot was about as far away from dealing with this antenna confronting this is like you could get, I did draw it, you know. And so then the next time I went, I realized what I'd done, it was an avoidance. The next time that I went, I drew the face. And it was kind of dramatic in many ways, not only because of the corpse because the corpse rolled out and he said, they got a technician or whatever said, What parts we like to draw. And what do you mean, What part do you see you know, what's the guy's naked. And then he started peeling away, you know, parts of the body like the banana, because he'd already been cut in various ways. So you could want to if you want to see muscles or the bone or you see different parts and it was very, very strong experience for me, very powerful to spend this time with it. So the ultimate aim for this is in some way to use this as a way To find freedom, not clinging to anything in the world. And if it has the opposite effect, if it's depressing or discouraging, or then probably this is not the right meditation practice the right way to practice a particular time. And I can well imagine for some people, at times, it could be that way. I think of freedom, this abiding, independent, not clinging to anything in the world as being basically synonymous to having a heart that's ready for compassion. Also. I think in every culture there's a different relationship to death and with with death, which sitting with death means and it's been pointed out by anthropologists that In the west in America, when Buddhist teachers and people talk about this particular kind of practice of spending time with a corpse or contemplating a corpse, it's usually done with the with the rationale that it helps to put your life in perspective and helps you straighten out your priorities and really get a sense of what's most important. And the same apologist I said, if you go back and read the ancient Buddhist texts, and you know, well, it's not ancient, but the how that practice is done in Asia. They usually don't give that as a rationale for this practice there. But they usually give it rather as the rationale is helping a person disadvantaged by and free oneself from the attachments to one's own body as the primary one. Yes. It's a really it's really an equalizer. So he said that this, this exercise can also teach us not to hate other people, right? be envious of them, because they too will be in that state. So that, you know, both of you know, there'll be dead, they'll be corpse at some point, but also, most people will

die.

You know, we go through the normal, normal or universal kind of aspects of life, sickness, old age and death, some some form or other. And sometimes to realize that we all share that nature, part of Buddha spirituality one strong emphasis as a Buddhist spirituality, it has been historically or whatever is to focus on that aspect of our experience, which is universal, as opposed to that aspect, which is

individualistic. And so a lot of the wisdom that comes from recognizing this universal rather than recognizing what's particular with me, we use the word insight. And in the psychological West, people often think insight means insight. Psychological insight into what's particular about how I take how I work. That's, you know, but in traditional Buddhism insight is not into what's particular to yourself, but rather those very deep insights, where you understand that what that aspects of yourself which is also universal, what we share with everyone. And that's gives birth to freedom and to compassion. Last thing, I have no problem with

my own my own disintegration. But when I think of this happening,

I can handle that.

Maybe I hope you don't have the opportunity. In your in your imagination. Yes, maybe. I don't know.

I don't.

Usually when I miss this kind of example, in the way that I've been, I know that monastic Some people do with nasia isn't unless it's in a monastery where it's a fella monk or the abbot or something like that. It's usually people you don't have a close relationship with. So there's a kind of impersonal distance. And it said in the ancient texts that I think it says, might be making it up here, but are getting confused, getting confused about it, that if it gives rise to fear or regret or grief, then when shouldn't do that. shouldn't do that practice that way. So I can imagine when it's your loved one that you know that maybe that's not the right place to do that kind of this conductor. sighs I don't maybe. So, I hope this evening was useful, significant or in some way for each of you to the contemplation of death is a very important practice in Buddhism. There's different ways of doing it. Some of them are a lot less gruesome than this. And it's considered to be one of the meditation practices, which is universally useful for people. So anyway, it's an important meditation practice in its own right. I hope that it was useful for you tonight. If it hasn't been useful for you, then I would encourage you to leave every single part of this evening's discussion here in this room when you leave. Thank you all very much.