

Quarrels (5 of 5) Unity Not Divisiveness

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Gil Fronsdal

Welcome to the fifth talk on the Buddha's teachings on quarrels. Today I'm broadcasting this talk from Spirit Rock Meditation Center. I'm here with a statue of Kuan Yin, the great embodiment of the Bodhisattva of compassion, which seems appropriate for the topic we're talking about this week.

Once when I met Shinzen Young, one of the great elder *Vipassanā* teachers in the United States – a brilliant man, very creative as a Buddhist teacher – he told me he had created a program to teach mindfulness to teenagers. I believe some of them were troubled teenagers. I was really struck by the principle by which he taught these teenagers mindfulness.

First, when the teenagers came to him for training in mindfulness, he asked them to bring their favorite music. They would come with their music and they would listen to it. A big part of the session with him was listening to the music. He would not teach them any mindfulness directly. Instead, he would ask them questions about listening to their music. These were questions about their experience – what their mind did when they listened to the music.

I don't know exactly what his questions were, but I can imagine that he might ask, for example: “When you most enjoy your music, how do you feel? How would you characterize your attention when you are most enjoying your music? Were there times when you lost track of your music and drifted off in thought? What was that like for you? What was the quality of your being at that point as you were being distracted from the music?”

As he asked those questions, he directed the teen's attention to what was happening inside of themselves. Maybe it had never occurred to them to pay attention to that before. As they appreciated that, maybe Shinzen Young was teaching them to recognize the kind of attention they brought to their experience.

The principle that I want to share with you is that as he taught this way and asked the teens these questions,

he said the most fundamental principle that the facilitator had to operate with was: no matter what answer the teens provided for the questions, they were all accepted. No answer was questioned or considered not good enough or wrong. Every answer was held as if right. He was practicing an unconditional acceptance of each teen and their own experience, and how they reported on it.

Part of what they were learning about mindfulness was the example of Shinzen Young or people he trained to do this. Through the kind of attention the teachers brought, they created space and allowed each teen to be themselves. Perhaps for some of these teens – maybe the troubled ones – there had not been many adults in their lives who had that kind of unconditional acceptance or willingness to receive them as if nothing was wrong. And so that's how they learned mindfulness.

This is also a principle for us: that we can do no wrong. We can practice mindfulness this way and learn to do this for ourselves. Everything is just something else we can bring a certain kind of attention to and really see and make space for.

I think Shinzen brought a sense of safety to the teens. The Buddha said, "Make yourself safe for all beings.

Make yourself safe for yourself." In this way, in the field of your awareness and attention, there is no criticism, no blame. In a certain way, you can do no wrong.

Conventionally you might do something that is not healthy, helpful, and wholesome. But there's something much more valuable than seeing it as wrong. This caring attention that can hold unskilful behavior – that allows something to settle, resolve, process itself, and let go – is more valuable. We believe – I believe of you – that you have the ability to heal, settle, and drop into this deeper place of wholeness that is inhibited or blocked whenever we're involved in seeing ourselves as wrong.

Of course, we do things that are harmful, things that we regret, and treat ourselves in ways that are not so healthy. This is part of human life. This is not accepting it naively – (“Please go ahead and keep doing that.”) But there's a way of offering a kind of safety, an attentive safety, that allows something to relax. We have access to something deeper within us, deeper wellsprings of well-being and wholeness.

So when we apply this unconditional acceptance to quarrels and disputes – if we're engaged in them – there is a deeper agenda or possibility that we might want to offer, which we learn through Buddhist practice.

As we learn to do this for ourselves, we learn to enter into disagreements or conflicts with an approach of not trying to be right or blame other people.

We're not looking to condone what's happened; we're not looking to allow whatever is harmful to continue. But we are bringing an attitude, a kind of attention where we make ourselves safe for others so that people we're in conflict with do not feel our hostility. They do not feel that we have blamed them or boxed them into a certain perception of who they are. They do not feel that now they have to verbally box it out with us to protect themselves.

At the same time, offering safety to others that way does not mean we have to give in to them. Giving ourselves safety means that we have the ability to hold our ground, to be centered in ourselves and able to say, "No, no, I can't go along with that." But we can do that without hostility, yelling, or arguments. We feel an inner strength – no one is going to push us over. We're not going to agree to anything that we don't want to do. Other people might do things in the world that we might not agree with, but we don't have to agree. Then we can stay as a person who is safe for all beings.

This goes along with the Buddha's teachings. One of the core ethical teachings comes from an ethical set of

precepts called the “Ten Skillful Actions.” These are more important than the Five Precepts. In fact, the first four of the Ten Skillful Actions are the same as the precepts. But these Ten Skillful Actions are the very actions that people who are on the path of practice can use as a reference point for how to live their lives.

The Five Precepts are basic principles of living a good life. For practitioners, we want to up the standard. We want to be more careful. These Ten Skillful Actions provide that.

One of them is that we are to abandon malicious or hostile speech. I want to read you the full explanation of how to practice this:

Abandoning malicious speech, one abstains from malicious speech. One does not repeat elsewhere what one has heard here in order to divide those people from these. Nor does one repeat to these people what was heard elsewhere in order to divide these people from those.

(The point is: to avoid dividing people, do not speak in such a way that there ends up being hostility or suspicion between people in any way.)

Thus one is one who reunites those who are divided, a promoter of friendships, who enjoys

concord, rejoices in concord, delights in concord, a speaker of words that promote concord.

So there is a very important distinction about speaking words that divide people. Even if the person that you are talking about is not present, if you speak in a malicious or gossipy way about someone – about how they made a mistake, and how terrible they are – you are now promoting a division between the person you are talking about and the person that you are talking to. And that division spreads.

We want to be a person who does not divide others. Maybe you need to talk about some of the difficulties and behaviors of others that are harmful or challenging. Then you need to figure out a solution in a way that does not create divisions.

You might do this with the attitude: “I am really troubled by what this person is doing, I think it needs to stop. I can't go along with it. I want to figure out a way to talk to this person and deal with it that does not perpetuate hostility or accentuate the divide. Can I address this issue in a way that shows my care and my attempt to be friends again?”

This is a fundamental teaching of the Buddha for people who are on the path of liberation. To divide – or to be hostile or malicious – goes in the opposite direction

from people who want to be on the path to freedom, compassion, and care.

Avoiding malicious talk and talk that divides, and instead talking in friendly ways or ways that unite people, does not mean that we're avoiding difficult conversations.

Another teaching from the Buddha has to do with the monastic community – a community in which everyone has agreed to come together and live by certain agreements for which they are accountable. It is a guideline specifically for monastics. Sometimes monastics have to reprove each other. Sometimes they have to talk to each other and say, “You know, what you did wasn't right,” or “That’s not how it should be,” or “You may have done something that was harmful here.” Monastics have hundreds of rules that they have agreed to live by. They are accountable for these rules. Some are quite serious. There is a set of five rules that if a monastic breaks them, the person is automatically no longer a monastic and can never be a monastic again – for example, if they kill someone.

This is what the Buddha said about how one monastic reproves another:

By speaking at the right time, speaking what is factual, speaking with gentleness, speaking about

what is connected to liberation, and speaking with goodwill.

This is a high standard. Speaking with friendliness and goodwill – if you don't have goodwill, don't reprove anyone. Don't confront someone about what they've been doing if you can't have goodwill for them. Don't do it at the wrong time when they're not ready, when it's not going to have any benefit. Be careful to speak what is factual. Don't interpret. Don't lead with your feelings and your attitudes as if they are the truth. Speak with gentleness.

I love the encouragement to speak what is connected to liberation. Speak in a way that's connected to your own liberation, not in the opposite way. Speak in a way that supports the liberation of others. Regarding the liberation of others, the first step is to help people feel safe with you, even if they are attacking you (hopefully just verbally). There is something very powerful about being a safe person for others.

It is inevitable that we will be in quarrels and disputes, conflicts and disagreements, in this world of ours. If there is violence, there is another way to respond besides hostility and divisiveness.

I'll end with an example about the different groups that are offering a nonviolent approach, trying to unite

people rather than divide them in the current conflict in the Middle East. There is an organization called Family Circle with about 700 members. These are people in Israel and Palestine whose children have been killed over the years and decades over the Israeli-Palestinian violence. They come together because of their shared grief and pain, sometimes having lost their very young children.

I read about one Palestinian person: his child was standing in front of the school – imagine a school – and was shot by Israeli bullets. It's in the context of violence, but still, it was the killing of a child.

Although it is very difficult, these parents come together to become friends with each other across the Israeli-Palestinian divide, to find another way – a way of peace – because they believe that there's no solution in violence. It just perpetuates the cycle.

For ourselves, let us not perpetuate the cycles of any kind of violence, including those that come out of ordinary disputes and quarrels. Let's find a way to bring safety, peace, and nonviolence so that the best in each person's heart can grow. Can we have confidence that at the base of the heart – the base of everyone's heart – there is a potential for wholeness, love, nonviolence, and care that can heal this world?

Thank you so much for the opportunity to talk in the last two weeks about these topics that are so important to me.