

9_30_26 Talk*

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[00:00:01] Last week, we talked about the four immeasurables, and I referenced the four karmas from the previous time that I'd been with this group. So I'd like to just review a little bit and then get back into the four immeasurables. And to start, The question that's always really useful to ask is, why do we practice and why do we study? What's the purpose? What is the reason why we're doing this? So first the via negativa. It's not particularly to become good at meditating, per se. And it's not to become scholars, per say. It's to become good people, to be able to be kind, to develop minds that you can use in ways that are helpful.

[00:01:11] So with shamatha, just as I was saying at the beginning of the practice session, that strength of mind that when your mind goes wandering off and starts thinking about whatever, and then you realize that... There can be an attachment to staying with that thought, or a fascination. And so the act of coming back to your meditation, back to you objective meditation, back to practice, your strength of mind to do that is developing a quality of mind that... Allows your mind, that allows you to work with your mind. So meditation is developing a mind that is responsive and supple and clear, that develops a mind that is vivid, stable, and clear. And you can do things with it.

[00:02:14] Meditation is so that you can develop subtlety of mind, sorry, study. Is so that you can develop subtlety of mind and start to understand the categories, the different ways in which your mind works. It's like having a map. If you're going to be driving somewhere, if you're gonna go on a trip, it's good to have a map of the place you're going so that can start to know what routes and what kinds of things you'll encounter. So, the study of the Dharma. Opens up the range of different experiences and lets you identify them and then work with those. And then there are practices that you can do to work with the different experiences that you have.

[00:03:03] So. We become less trapped through the study and the practice, the combination, less trapped by habits of mind and more open to actually working with the situations. We see the roots of confusion and dualistic fixation. And then we develop the compassion. That's the caring for people, the openness, the care for others. We develop the wisdom because when we put our attention on other people and caring for them. That opens up space, gets rid of the, lessens the claustrophobia of identifying with ourselves and the struggle to maintain our identity. We lessen that struggle. We relax. Our attention goes out, caring for other people. That opens space. Space is wisdom. Space allows things to become clearer. Gives you the relaxation of mind to perceive with accuracy. And then as that develops, you start to develop the ability to understand what is actually helpful. And that's skillfulness. Skillful means. So that combination of compassion, wisdom and skillful means, that's the heart of the Mahayana journey.

[00:04:21] So. The four karmas are a template that describe the kinds of actions that you can take as someone who cares about other people. It's a description of the actions of a bodhisattva or the actions of a protector from a sort of traditional dharmic Mahayana dharma perspective. And then the four measurables, they talk about how to open your heart. To the world, so they inform those actions.

[00:04:58] If you continue your study, or if I ever join this group again, we could talk about the four foundations of mindfulness. And those are how to stabilize and work with your

mind clearly. How to, so the four foundations of Mindfulness are mindfulness of body, being aware of your body and how it moves, how it feels. Mindfulness of feelings. So that you see the flickers of emotional attachment and response. Mindfulness of mind, so that you see them movement of mind. The jumpiness, the monkey mind, the stability of mind as you process it. And then the mindfulness of reality. So that's just what is truth. How do you develop a discerning awareness? So each of these categories of four serve to deepen your understanding. Of yourself and your experience and the phenomenal world that you find yourself in and develop tools to be able to work with that.

[00:06:03] The goal of this, again, another way to look at this is to become your own meditation instructor. It's always good to have a spiritual friend or a teacher or someone sharing your journey with you with whom. You can talk about things, someone who can introduce you to new practices, you can have lots of teachers, but at heart, you're wanting to become your own meditation instructor, your own reference point for what is true, for what real, and you develop this through the study and practice of meditation.

[00:06:45] So, the four karmas that we talked about, I'll just name them again, but I won't go into them in much depth. There was pacifying, enriching, magnetizing, and destroying, and pacifying was that quality of giving space. If you're encountering a situation with yourself or with someone else or with a lot of confused energy there. You can just hold that space, provide a context for it to take place, that is safe. And you let that energy work its way out. So if it's your own mind, for example, you can say, I need a minute, and you just observe yourself with a certain kind of love and kindness and let that play out. You can do some breathing exercises, lots of things you could do. That allows things to settle somewhat. So that then it can be worked with.

[00:07:45] Then enriching is that quality of injecting into the situation, loving kindness, one of the four immeasurables. And that gives a sense of enriching the situation of drawing out with confidence what is in the situation so that you can actually work with it. And so that there's the confidence that it can manifest.

[00:08:14] Then there's magnetizing, and that's where you're drawing out the details. That's associated with sympathetic joy that we'll talk about. And then once the details are there, you can see what's confusion and what's wisdom, and you help the confusion to be let go. That could be in a very decisive, sharp-cutting way. It could be a very kind way. But you end with just the wisdom of the situation.

[00:08:42] So we've gone into that. I went into that in significant detail in the first talk, so that's available, and then a little bit last week. What I wanna talk about more this week is about the four immeasurables.

[00:08:57] So the four immeasurables, the first one is equanimity. And each of the four immeasurables has what's called a near enemy and a far enemy. So equanimity is the quality of being able to have a certain sense of perspective and stability as you encounter situations that can be within your own inner experience or outside of you. Certain kind of stability and that's based on your practice again, having worked with your mind, having a mind that's a useful tool, but also on your insight into the situation and being able to see that confused activity is the source of suffering. And then being able to actually perceive that and not get hooked by it, you develop a kind of a stable mind that is able to hold a situation. You don't buy in as much. And equanimity is the, I would say the thing that allows the other immeasurables to work. Equanimity, is that quality of mind. That allows you to work skillfully with situations.

[00:10:24] The near enemy of equanimity is a quality of indifference, of apathy, of cold numbness. It can feel at first like equanimity, like I don't care, you know, it's no big deal. But there's a certain sense of apathy about it that is a way of insulating yourself from directly relating to the situation. So. If you feel that quality of slight kind of retraction into yourself of focusing inward and a rejection, that's the embodied experience of the near enemy of equanimity. So you can actually trust your body to wake you up to the perception of losing your equanimity. And then you can use that recognition to come back into your equanimity, to reconnect with. A sense of stability, of magnanimity, of forbearance, and of affection for people.

[00:11:29] So the far enemy of equanimity is pretty straightforward, craving, aversion, greed, negativity. Those are much clearer, much easier to recognize. These far enemies, they're basically the opposite of the virtue. So developing equanimities and recognizing that it's on a continuum that exists from a kind of awake, kind awareness through to the near enemy where it starts to have subtle perversions, subtle shifts that take you away from the virtue and your ability to work with situations. And then the far enemy, which is just, you've given up and you're just moving into, damn, I really want that, or wow, I hate that, you know, that kind of thing. So being able to recognize and trust your body and trust your own mind and understanding, perceiving and holding to the virtues is an important aspect of studying this stuff.

[00:12:35] So the next one, the next of the four measurables would be loving kindness. And that's that quality of warmth that comes up in you. It's easy to connect with that if you think of like a parent with their child, you know, a newborn. Before all of the details start to come in, there's just this sense of awe, of like, wow. You know, that feeling. I remember the first time I saw my niece, you know, and I was just flabbergasted by how visceral the experience of just like, that is amazing. And that's that feeling of loving-kindness of Metta. And it's something that we can aspire to because, you know, everybody has that in them.

[00:13:30] The near enemy of loving-kindness is the sense of conditional love, a sense of sentimentality. It's basically loving on your own, your own terms. You are willing to say, yeah, that's cool, but it's got to be the way I want it. So with the near enemy, there's a quality of how to put it. Um... Almost like I do too much for them. You're measuring, you're feeling a sense of contraction of moving away a little bit. That's the physical quality. If you reflect on being judicious in allocating who you love and how much you love, there's a sense separation that you can feel in yourself physically. And that's the way it is. Like a warning bell to say, move back into the pure sense of loving-kindness. And you can do that by reconnecting with an image, with an experience, with someone you really care about. Connect with that and then see if you can extend that out to the situation.

[00:15:12] The far enemy of loving kindness is hatred, ill will, anger. Again, those are... Easier to spot these far enemies. And they're kind of identified just to give you a sense again of the continuum on which these exist.

[00:15:31] So the next one would be compassion. And if loving-kindness is the sense of your heart opening up and extending out, in a loving way to an object of love, which can be anybody. Compassion is a quality of response to suffering that you actually care. So it's an interesting distinction to make where loving-kindness is just this emergence of love to the world. Compassion, is a response of the emergence of love to suffering so that you care.

[00:16:19] Um the near enemy is a quality of pity or condescending grief is considered from a position of superiority um from a decision of being above and separate from something um it feels a little bit self-aggrandizing or it can um it uses pity as a reference point elevate oneself. So physically you can experience that as that sense of separation and somewhat of coming into yourself and celebrating your own ability to feel pity or to feel care for someone else. So it's a self-referential allocation of a certain amount of care in a certain way for a situation. It's not. That quality of the dharmic pure compassion where you're simply responding with your heart to suffering and you're giving rise to a desire to alleviate the suffering as best you can.

[00:17:33] The far enemy of compassion would be cruelty or actually wishing someone harm. And again, not that hard to find. To recognize when that's happening.

[00:17:50] The last one is sympathetic joy. So Sympathetic joy, if loving kindness was a quality of your open heart, connecting with the world and loving. And compassion is a quality of your opened heart connecting with the world, and seeing suffering, and wanting to alleviate the suffering. Sympatetic joy is a quality of recognizing the wonder of the world. And you celebrate it. You're able to celebrate other people's good fortune. So you have a sense of looking at the world with kind eyes.

[00:18:40] The near enemy of sympathetic joy would be insincere joy, would be conditional pride, your willing to celebrate someone else as a way of showing how kind you are. But you're not really simply celebrating their good fortune, the result of their good work, the beauty of a flower, the wonder of a song. You're not simply able to be with it. You are wanting to produce the song yourself, for example, or have someone listen to how you can harmonize with it. So you're separating yourself from the experience and in some way reinforcing your ego with it.

[00:19:33] So. You know, in daily life, you can look for things like the polite smile when you've actually got a little tightness in your stomach. You can, if somebody shares good news, if your instinct is to tie it back to yourself, talk about how you've done something or some experience of your own, as opposed to simply staying with the other person, is there a subtle feeling of competition? Or a kind of a masking of your actual experience. That would be the near enemy and the way that you can make use of your somatic experience to have a reference point that tells you you're shifting away from the enlightened attribute of sympathetic joy.

[00:20:25] And the far enemy is straightforward jealousy and the resentment.

[00:20:31] So... Again, these four qualities of equanimity, loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, they serve to expand your perception or your perceptive capacity of your own experience. They give you a reference point of what you can aspire to in terms of your relationship with your experience and the people around you. They can be used for referencing your inner experience. They can used for reference in your outer experience. There are the near and the far enemies. There's a quality of a somatic reference point that can serve to help you understand and recognize when you're shifting, and then the desire to come back. All of that is also referenced in the power of your meditation practice. When you recognize you're shifting off, whether it's you recognize an emotional flavor, you feel the tightness, you feel that somatic reference point that I talked about, your meditation practice gives you the strength of mind to be able to come back to the enlightened virtue, to the enlightenment quality.

[00:21:52] So it's really good to practice tasting those enlightened qualities, equanimity, it can be. You're sitting practice. It can be you're on a hike in the woods, you're sitting by the ocean, by a lake, you're looking up at the clouds, and you go, this is still. Savor that reference point, savor that moment, and use it as a reference point in your practice of life.

[00:22:25] When you're with someone, you really just love. Um, savor that moment and put it into your bank of experience to use as a reference point when you're coming back from one of the near enemies or one of the far enemies. It can be that reference point, that stable ground that you give rise to that helps you tune back into your better intentions.

[00:22:54] With compassion, there's so much suffering in the world. And if you've ever felt your heart just open and break, when you see the suffering or read about one of the enormous tragedies that's going on in the world right now, that reference point of being broken open and just wanting to be able to be helpful, not giving into despair, not giving in to a condescending relationship. But really letting it touch you and let it motivate you to develop your wisdom, develop your dharmic attributes. That reference point can really serve you as your anchor in that situation.

[00:23:42] And then with sympathetic joy, if there's someone in your life who you love enough that when they share some good news, you're just ecstatic. That is wonderful. You got into the college you want. You won that race. You got an A. You know, this meal you cooked tastes fantastic and you're just feeling great about it. Savor that reference point and use it as an emotional, as a somatic touchstone for what you can come back to in your practice.

[00:24:18] So I'll just say a little bit more, because I think this has been a lot of information. I've seen a lot questions coming up, so I want to save time for that. There are practices which can help you develop these attributes. And at the heart of it, one of the easiest ways to think about the practices, one is just visualize three people. Someone you love, someone you're neutral about, someone you don't like. And develop all of these four qualities in relationship to those people. And you can say it out loud. You can say things out loud, I want them to feel at peace. I want to feel joy. I want then to be separated from suffering. I want then to not suffer. Just say these things to yourself and say them for each person in order and then once you've done that and you've stabilized that experience then you extend it out to all sentient beings in the universe.

[00:25:30] There's a lot to say about this and so for example Pema Chodron writes eloquently and beautifully about Tonglen practice which is another of the great practices of the four measurable. So there's lots of things that you can do. I'd encourage you to read and try them, practice them. One more quick thing to do. If you're feeling like a near or a far enemy has a grip on you, and you're wanting to just do something in that moment, you can a practice called stop. The S is just when you feel that spike. And you recognize it somatically, emotionally, in your breath, you're tightening up, whatever it is, just stop, just freeze. Don't talk, don't type, take your hands away from the keyboard, just stop for a few seconds. That's the S of stop.

[00:26:33] Then the T is take a breath. For about eight seconds, just breathe. Nice big breaths. You know, there's the thing called vase breathing if you want to study that, but just come back into your body and let breathing bring you back into you body around eight to 10 seconds or so.

[00:26:54] Then the O is observe. For about as much time as you've done the others, just observe what is it that caught you? What is it swept you away? What is that you're responding to that you want it to come back to yourself? And name it. Envy. I feel envy. I feel jealous. Just acknowledge that. And for many people, naming it, acknowledging it, that starts to take some of the power out of it, starts to let it deflate.

Michael Gayner [00:27:31] And then the last one, the P, is pivot. Pivot to the immeasurable. Use that reference point that you have of the enlightened virtues, you know, that baby that you know that person you love. Use that reference point, soak in that a little bit. So stop, that's the acronym, S is for stop. Just don't do anything, be a stick. T, take some breaths, come back into your body. O, observe just what is going on, name it. P, pivot to the immeasurable. And that's connect with what you've saved up, the reference points that you've developed of those enlightened attributes. Lots of words, and fortunately, I think this is recorded, but there's lots of eloquent people out there who talk about these in books to read. Right now, I'll just take whatever questions we have time for, and I think, Kathleen, if I understood correctly, you're gonna read the questions for me, and.

Kathleen [00:28:47] I will do my best. There's some rich questions. So feel free to do this together too, Michael. So I'm going to go back to the beginning, I think, because that's a good place to go. Jovian at 648 says, are you saying we can become fixated on the noticing of the thoughts arising and that at a certain point the noticing also requires a letting go us.

Michael Gayner [00:29:15] Yes, you can absolutely become fixated on anything. The, how to put it. So the best metaphor for this is how you experience meditation. So the simplest form of breath meditation is you follow your out-breath and then you follow you're in-breathe and you just go through the cycle. There's lots of variations of this and then some point of thought will occur. If you dwell on that thought, then you're caught by the thought. If you just think bad thought, you're cut by the thought and by your reaction to the thought, we're really good at those kinds of things. Those happen instinctively. What we want to develop is the strength of mind to be kind, to not be caught, to come back. So, you can just touch the thought. Just allow yourself to acknowledge the thought and recognize it. Have a sense of affection, like, oh, yeah, you again. That thought about, you know, blah, blah blah, whatever it is, and just come back to your breath. So, a certain kind of kindness, a light touch on it, and then come back, so you're not indulging on the thought.

Kathleen [00:30:51] Thank you I'm going to jump to I think it's Donna at 703 and I had this question too Can you briefly define the four karmas and then are these various responses to conflict?

Michael Gayner [00:31:07] So, the four karmas, pacifying, enriching, magnetizing, and destroying. They're a description of the action of a bodhisattva, which is simply someone who's committed themselves to the awakening of all beings. Everyone who's on this call on some level is a bodhisattva. Uh pacifying uh actually just to back up so you can apply the four karmas to yourself or to other people um it's basically a template for enlightened action how do you engage what is a skillful way to engage and it sounds ordinal you know you do one two three four it doesn't always happen like that but it's good to understand the template and then you can use it as a reference point and allow your your insight and wisdom to actually help you decide what is needed in the moment.

[00:32:07] So if you think of it as you encounter a situation in yourself or with someone else and it's energized in this like and emotions and feelings and you know anger or whatever it might be, you don't. Jump on it and hold it down. That's just gonna create more struggle. You give it a pasture, like a horse, to run around it. Get that energy out. And you don't comment on it. You don't provide negativity. You don't really try to engage. You're just giving it space. So that's pacifying and that's connected with equanimity.

[00:32:48] Then enriching is connected with the immeasurable of loving-kindness. There's a sense of appreciation. You relate to something and you give it a sense of confidence in the beauty that's within. You're feeding love into the situation. And that can be simply through attention. Some people they're never listened to and you just listen to them and that's an incredible gift of enrichment. Some people need something more. You may need something more, some appreciation of, like, there's beauty here. So that quality of enriching connected with love and kindness.

[00:33:32] Then there's magnetizing, and that's connected with compassion. And that's a quality of drawing out what is actually there, because there is beauty and there is suffering. And you bring your compassion to that situation to say, what do we see? What is actually perceived. You allow things to manifest because they have confidence that it is a safe situation in which to manifest both wisdom and confusion.

[00:34:04] Then the fourth karma is destruction, which sounds like, I got a goal like this, and it's not. It can be a very sharp thing. It could be just a smile. The goal of destruction is to help someone to provide a context in which someone can let go of their confusion. That someone can be you, someone can someone else. You're not letting go of their conclusion, you're not doing that for them, you're providing a context in which your relationship supports their ability to do that. So a smile can help someone let go of a fixation, if that's the confusion that they're manifesting. Whatever the confusion is, you help them let go of that and you help them hold to the wisdom, the insight of the situation. So that's that fourth karma. And yeah, I think that's probably a good enough description because we've got other questions.

Kathleen [00:35:10] Let's go back to the four immeasurables, and this is 719 with Anne. She wants you to elaborate a little bit more on observe and stop. How can we observe without spiraling or getting fused with the emotions and the physical pain we feel in the moment?

Michael Gayner [00:35:31] Yeah, that's a great question. That's a really great question, because everything I've talked about sounds like, oh, I can just do these things. I've got all these techniques. I should be able to handle it. And then if you don't, it's like, oh, god, I'm a failure. Some situations are really hard, and some you might not be ready for. And that's the conversation we were having right at the beginning of the evening around boundaries. Boundaries work both ways and can arise in the moment and be something that is a skillful response to a situation that frankly is overwhelming. I can't relate to this right now. That is the thing you have the right to say and can be the most skillful response to a situations. And you can preface it by saying I care, but I need a little space right now I need to take a moment. I need connect with my ability to be present before I can actually engage. So there are definitely situations that are just overwhelming and a part of this whole journey of learning about how to understand ourselves, learning about what our capacity is. It's allowing to be human. You know, allowing us to not be perfect, to not to be super people of the Dharma, you know. We are on a journey.

Kathleen [00:37:08] Here's one for Mary Lynn at 706. Where does the experience of the extended family scapegoat fit into this framework? And what would be the right way or the middle way for that person who's an actual victim of the dysfunctional family system? Is that too particular?

Michael Gayner [00:37:29] So it's out of my expertise, not that I'm an expert about the Dharma, but there's terms of art that arise from therapy and psychology that is not my area of specialty. So I don't feel I can really answer that effectively other than on a theoretical level, which I don't think is doing justice to the question. But I think Rick would, you know, understand these more, and so I'd encourage you to that question to Rick if it's still alive for you.

Kathleen [00:37:59] Right. How about practices to strengthen equanimity? Donna asked this. Does it come through meditation only? You mentioned stop you mentioned tongue in any other practices to strengthen equanimity.

Speaker 3 [00:38:19] Yeah...

Michael Gayner [00:38:33] Just trying to think of what would be a really useful sort of pithy way to look at that, because there's lots and lots of practices. I think one of the qualities of the near enemy of indifference, for example, is kind of fading out a fogginess or a coldness or some quality of separating yourself so that you can have a pseudo-peacefulness. If you're feeling that and your reference point is, it's not that you're giving into anger, you're not hating the person, you're jealous, you're just kind of separating yourself from the situation. One way to give rise to your capacity to develop equanimity is feeling a quality of awake. Energetically awake and present. And there's a lot of ways to do that. You could just sit up straight, bind your sits bones again, take a breath, be present. In Qigong and other practices, there's tons of ways to give rise to lungta, to wind horse, there's pressure points that can help you come back and wake up. But the main thing is some quality of coming back and coming back in a way that's awake and energized. And then, because equanimity is not fuzzy, blah, blah, bleh, equanimity is present and balanced. So I think that's a really significant way to work with a misconception around what equanimity can mean. Peacefulness can be juicy and useful and present, powerful.

Kathleen [00:40:55] So I think Elaine's question at 7.15 relates to this, and you may have already answered it, but is acceptance different from equanimity? What happens if acceptance becomes more like apathy or defeatism?

Michael Gayner [00:41:09] So two different questions there. So the first thing, acceptance is a relational phenomena, equanimity is a quality of mind. So they're both important. One is a reflection of the other. So that's the first question. What was the second part of the question?

Kathleen [00:41:28] What happens if acceptance becomes more like apathy or defeatism?

Michael Gayner [00:41:33] Yeah, so that's a near enemy. That's a quality of kind of, right, you're not awake, you're separating yourself from it. It's not equanimity. So use your reference point that you've developed, use your point of what equanimities really feels like to bring yourself back.

Kathleen [00:41:58] Okay, so this is probably our last question. And I'm sorry, Jen, we're not gonna be able to take live questions. We're just almost out of time. But Martha writes

at 721, excuse me. She's going back to the confusion conversation from last week. And she says, I'm curious about the behavior that occurs when something like the confusion away from inherent good has been pointed out. And the individual doubles down on the separating, possibly harming behavior. What's occurring here? In essence, why does this happen? There's research about the tenacity of conviction, no matter the outside influence to encourage other behaviors. That's a lot.

Michael Gayner [00:42:45] Yeah, I mean, at heart, it's another way into the most common experience, which is we develop this identity and then we strengthen it. And we do that through what's called the three kleshas, you know, the three poisons. If something is threatening us, we will fight it. Or if you can't fight it off, you try to seduce it and bring it in to support you. And if that doesn't work, you ignore it. So if someone's not ready to hear feedback, if they're in the thrall of their ego construct and it's threatened, they're gonna go through one of these three things. And it could be pretty much out of their control. And honestly... I experienced that on a daily basis, you know, where I'm caught in the thrall of my ego and one of those three attributes of fighting, something that threatens my construct or seducing it into like, yeah, that's me, baby, you know, or just ignoring it. Cause it's like, I can't deal with that. I experienced a lot. I think we all do.

[00:44:10] So, developing... Real sympathy, you know, real empathy of like, yeah, this is so human, you know. What is it that really allows us to be helpful? And often it's not pointing something out, it's just loving someone, right? Just care, we all know those people who come into a room and there's just like, you get the sense that they're with you, and they're not commenting, they bring the best out in you. They're not challenging you or calling you on your stuff. That's the aspiration, someone who doesn't need words. In order to go through these qualities and manifest them, whose presence just has that warmth because they're cultivating those inner virtues, those inner qualities and they're manifesting it to themselves so that they really feel it and then they can extend that out. And you do that by being honest and saying, yeah, that's me, I do this every day lots and lots of times, and I'm gonna keep working with it forever and ever and ever.

Kathleen [00:45:26] Well, that's a great note to end on. Martha, do you have anything you want to wrap up? It's been so wonderful to have you these two weeks, and my pleasure and joy to be your co-host. So, any final comments?

Michael Gayner [00:45:41] Uh, I think the final thing is trust yourself, um, just you know, you're amazing. By definition and in reality, that's the thing to trust. And then just allow that to blossom and the clouds of confusion to dissipate. You get these glimpses and you can develop those glimpses and there's your meditation, there's study, there's gathering and treasuring those moments that serve as a reference point. There's the strength of mind. There's endless opportunities to apply all this stuff in ways that are just kind of like a smorgasbord. So enjoy the ride, trust yourself. Yeah. And thank you all. This has been a delight. You're a wonderful group. And Kathleen, thank you so much for your support.