

## “Seeing Views” Transcript (edited), November 2021 Uposatha

Tonight I'd like to offer a reflection about something which is actually very useful in our practice and useful to contemplate in life in general.

.....When we go through the oldest strata of teachings, what we see again and again is the Buddha encouraging his disciples to avoid one thing, and that is views. He likens them to being a snake in your path that you would obviously walk around and do whatever you can to be free of it.

I think it's very interesting because when we think back to that time, the people that were around the Buddha were already renunciants. They had already renounced the world. They had no possessions. They were living in the forest. They were eating alms food. They were meditating. They were very accomplished meditators.

They were already past bhava, the desire to become things. They had given up trying to make something of themselves in the world. They had given up their intense self-mortification, their hate for the body, and their hate for things that they felt were holding them back.

And yet still, they were not enlightened. They were free of what we usually think of as craving, yet they were not free. In fact, they were not yet on the path to freedom.

This is the danger of views, of viewpoints, of standpoints and philosophies. This is the danger of taking a stand on an idea -- even if your practice is perfect -- if you are attached to an idea, you will not get free.

Because our ideas feed our thoughts. Our thoughts feed our speech, they feed our actions. In fact, our views and our standpoints come before everything else. And I ask you, can you think of a single argument you might have gotten into where there were no views involved? Think ... any argument, any disagreement, any conflict where there weren't views?

Yeah, you might be like, “Uh, well, there was this one time I was playing with my dog and we got to wrestling and, um, you know, then he started biting me. So I got a little upset at him and we got into a little tussle. But that was a conflict. There were no views involved. He was just being a jerk.” And I just say, well, that's funny, he was probably thinking that you were being a jerk. He was thinking you were the one who needed to let go. Could there have been views even there? This is most of our conflicts. All we see is the moment of impact but views are the root cause.

Most of our disagreements, most of our attachments, most of our delusions are based on intellectual standpoints, but these things are sometimes so essential that they're utterly invisible to us.

All of our life is like this. We don't recognize our standpoints until we come up against something where we're inclined to hold on. That's where there's something we've decided previously. We've already staked the position, and we feel this, this other kind of taṇhā, this other kind of outflow called diṭṭhāsava, the outflow of views and the outflow of views is the first thing that has to go before we can really even begin to work on the path.

Because our attachment to views is our attachment to the idea of a permanent right and wrong. And it's funny... anyone who has studied Buddhism has heard there is Right View, right? That's part of the noble eightfold path. And yet Right View is not any one standpoint. It's to know that views are suffering. It's to start to let them go; to start to avoid them. We start to see them as painful, as dark, as tumors. We try to be free of them, but how do you be free of views? And that's the conundrum that we fall into: when we look out into the world, it seems that our entire world is predicated on views, like everything is set up, like we have to take a standpoint.

That's the danger... we can tell ourselves that “this means I believe this,” but we find that sometimes, in particular circumstances, we don't actually believe that.

Our views are working against us.

Well, how do we take no standpoint? How do we do that?

This is an encouragement to begin to see this at work in our lives. We have this mix of groups. So there's very conservative people and very liberal people, and they're often overlapping. But there's a lot of us in the middle, actually. We never make the press, people are not talking about us. I think we're actually the majority, those of us who fall in the middle and are reasonable. People who are careful at times, who might agree or might not, but don't hold a grudge, don't really care much about it, you know, who are just trying to get by day to day.

And that's actually what it looks like to not have a standpoint, is to be in the middle and to not be sensational... to realize that we can't have an exact answer for some things, for anything, really. What we're encouraged to do, the way to have no viewpoint, is to start to see the world as impermanent.

Because the attachment to viewpoints is the idea of permanence somewhere out there in the world.

Like our ideas will somehow dictate reality. Like things are going to “be the same way” each time. Or that, “It's always gonna be like this”, or “That will always require this kind of response...” And I say, there's virtually nothing that we can say that about.

There are a few things we can say... that killing is always unwholesome. We know that it's just simple causality. It's always going to produce unpleasant results because it's motivated by greed, hatred, and delusion.

But what kind of response might a certain situation require? Well, it might actually require a response that could be harmful to other beings in certain circumstances. But is that killing necessarily? So say we catch a mouse and we take it far away and we let it go. Now we don't know if it's gonna find a home. We don't know if a hawk is gonna grab it.

We don't know if it'll find enough food. We might have doomed it to a really miserable existence. We don't know. Is that killing? No, not necessarily. Does that mean we can't catch the mouse? We can't relocate it? Well, it's also damaging our house. It's making a nuisance. It's making our situation worse. And in some ways, if we can live well and take care of people and practice the Dhamma, then we wouldn't want rodents to destroy our house.

So even in relation to something that we can say positively, 100% “killing is always unwholesome” ...we can't say “I will never be the cause of something else to die.”

But a viewpoint is one thing--we just say "never kill." Well, what does it mean to kill? That's what takes some real investigation. We have to look at each situation with fresh eyes, instead of having a viewpoint which tells us what to do in a certain situation.

And this is where all of the factors of the path actually start to come into play. When we rely on an ideological stance, we aren't using our faith. We aren't using our energy, we aren't using our wisdom. We aren't willing to look at the situation based on what is in front of us. To understand it "as is," we must be willing to throw out all of our permanent fixtures and ideas and assumptions and come from a space of, "Maybe I don't have all the answers. Maybe I don't know, or maybe I'll just have to do what seems like the best thing in this situation." That's where most of us are, most of the time, is somewhere in the middle. Yet it's easy to overlook.

There's a million varieties of "in the middle." From, "This is the worst thing that's ever happened" to, "This is no big deal," "It's always been happening" Somewhere in the middle, there's a billion varieties of being just a responsible human being.

So when the Buddha was first gathering up intelligent, wise, energetic people on this planet and teaching them the dhamma, he was finding the one thing that was holding them back was this: These were really intent practitioners, but they were basically sitting around all day trying to figure out the way the universe worked.

Yeah. They're trying to figure out does it have a beginning? Does it have an end? Is it finite? Is it infinite? Where do people go after they die? Do they exist, the enlightened beings, do they exist after death or do they not exist? Or do they both exist and non-exist? Do they neither exist nor not exist? And they were sitting and they were spinning their gears all day long, and the Buddha said something really simple. Basically, "Don't do that."

Yeah. Because that's short circuiting your faith, your energy, your mindfulness concentration, and wisdom. Focus on those, apply those to every single situation along the way.

Are you attached?

Just because something is pleasant or unpleasant doesn't mean it's the standard or that it should be done. We can look at each situation and we can practice and let go.

Because this is in fact a source of suffering. Having a view is painful. But the important thing to get past views is to start to see that pain and to recognize that, since time immemorial, we've been trying to treat that pain with ignorance, with the idea that "Let's just run to this answer that will solve it for us." It's painful to have to address each situation wisely and considerately.

So this is right, and that is wrong, but which is more painful in the end? Have we ever spoken an angry word that didn't come from some viewpoint? "They attacked me, they abused me, they robbed me." Those who have these thoughts will never be able to still hatred, because hatred is generated from such thoughts.

So whenever we find ourselves thinking, am I being respected? Is this my right? Should it be this way? There's a view in there somewhere, and we follow it back. There'll be a sense of self, a sense of me, a sense of I, and that's exactly the situation we can practice in. So we can ask ourselves, can I address the

situation, allowing that pain, that discomfort to be there? And can I deal with the situation in a way that's flowing? What if I don't have the answer?

This is one of the superpowers, actually, of a Dhamma practitioner. This is something that you can see, you've probably seen before, and if you have, you've probably been inspired. When you see somebody let go, now, it's one thing to just not be attached. And that's cool too. Like, say, something catches on fire and the Abbott of the temple is just like, "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Put it out. You know, just, just, yeah, there's a fire extinguisher over there..." but he doesn't get flustered, you know? There are people who respond to emergencies and paramedics, police officers and firefighters who know how to not get flustered in a difficult situation.

One phenomenal example predates the suttas by a couple of hours actually. So in the first council, the first gathering of monks after the Buddha's passing away, the venerable Ānanda was called in. And he had just attained enlightenment, and he was the one who had memorized all of these teachings that were spoken by the Buddha. But they called him in, and first they had to address some things that he did while he was not enlightened.

He basically made some missteps regarding, well, one, not asking the Buddha to use his psychic powers to stay alive. Apparently the Sangha felt this was Ananda's responsibility, and he failed to do it. And so Ānanda said, "You know, I don't really see that as a fault. I don't really see that I did anything wrong there." But then he said something very powerful, something which an enlightened being is capable of doing.

He's like, "I don't see it as a fault per se, but because it would conduce to harmony of the Sangha, I will confess it as a fault. I will ask for forgiveness, even though I don't see that I did anything wrong." And now I ask you, are you prepared to do that in every situation? And if somebody comes up to you and is like, how could you do this? And can you, if you feel like you didn't do anything wrong, can you still say, "I'm sorry."

Well, the next time you're presented with that situation, give it a try. It might be strange and new and weird and uncomfortable for a minute, but you might find, somewhere in there, that taste of liberation. And you might see the look of shock on the other person's face, because that's not how human beings normally respond to unfairness.

But the first noble truth is that life is unfair. Yeah. We're presented with unfair situations all the time, they're unpleasant, they're uncomfortable. It's not right. It's not right that we grow old and die. It's not fair. We lose the things that we love. It's not fair. And yet, when we're presented with something that's unfair, can we just say, well, that's, that's what it's like. Because that's what it's like to live without views, to live without expectations and assumptions and standpoints.

And those who are able to master this skill go through life in a very different way. As I've pointed out before, people are wondering if they're a stream enterer. Yeah. If you ask a stream enterer, "Are you a stream enterer?" they'll say, "I don't know." Because they've given up the idea of permanence. And so they'll say, "Well, I don't see anything here that's a stream enterer. I don't see anything here that's permanently a stream enterer. So I can't be sure. I don't know." They've let go of the need to prove it. They've let go of a viewpoint in regards to that.

The Buddha also talked about the reviewing factors of a stream enterer, that they can look and they can derive a sense of joy from their attainment of stream entry. And at the same time, they don't see themselves as having acquired anything. Yet when they reflect on what they've let go of, they experience happiness. It's that weird thing.

Another great example in the suttas is the Venerable Rāhula. So Venerable Rāhula was the first novice, he was ordained as a novice when he was seven years old, and it wasn't possible to ordain as a full monk until twenty.

Rāhula wasn't treated very well. Most of the monks, they weren't really cool with having little boys running around the temple. But Rāhula was kind of like an attendant. And at one point, these two monks are together, and one of 'em is talking. And he is like, "So what about that? What about that boy Rāhula?"

And the other monk goes, "Oh, he's fantastic, it's unbelievable. Check this out." And he reaches into his cupboard and he pulls out a robe and drops it on the floor. And he calls out, "Rāhula!" And Rāhula comes in, "Yes, venerable sir." And he is like, Rāh, my robe's on the floor." Rāhula looks down. He's like, "Oh, so it is venerable, sir," and he just scoops it up and he folds it up and he puts it away. And then the monk is like, "Okay, get out."

And Rahula says, "Yes, venerable sir!" and he leaves.

Would you be able to do that? I wonder, I wonder if I would be able to do that in a situation. But it's this interesting scenario of what it is to not say, "He doesn't respect me," or "This isn't right," or "This isn't fair," or "I can't take this, I can't take this for one more minute." Luang Por Sumedho, the senior Western disciple of Ajahn Chah, would find himself sitting in a monastery, saying, "I-can't-take-this-for-one-more-minute..."

And then he'd wait for a minute and he'd be like, "Oh. I guess I took it." It didn't actually take any effort. What was taking all the effort was the viewpoint, was the holding on, staking a claim and making a determination about something. All of that was taking incredible effort. The letting go doesn't take any effort at all. It's just to say, I'm going to meet this moment fresh, using all of my faculties.

And see what it is. And starting from this place of, yeah, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I don't know. And that's actually the quickest way to freedom is to say maybe I don't know the way to freedom. Which is really counter-intuitive, but there we are.

Well, since views condition thoughts, if we're able to let go of our views that are "permanent," then we'll be letting go of "permanent" thoughts. Since thoughts condition speech, we'll be letting go of speech that's around ideas that are permanent. And since speech conditions our actions in the world, our dialogue, how we act, then that will also be free of notions of permanence. And then when we start acting in a way in the world that doesn't hold the things, that doesn't think things are permanent or stable or reliable... well then from top to bottom, we will be living the life of an enlightened being.

We'll be not attaching the things. And it all starts with giving up the views that led us into that trap to begin with.

So these are some thoughts and maybe some ways of preceding your investigation into views, going forward. What does this mean? Where is it causing pain in our lives? We can ask. And if you think that you've gotten an answer, well then look at that, too.

What is it like to enter a situation without already knowing the answer? See if you can let go of that idea that you actually have a strong answer. That can lead you ever onward.