26.10.25 Dharma Talk: Transforming Suffering into Compassion by Sono

So thank you everyone for being here this morning, the 26th of October 2025. And the title of my talk today has got two titles. “Life as a Problem, Life as a Koan: Transforming Suffering into Compassion”. Like all my Dharma talks, I do my best to integrate my teachings from my own lineage. Starting with Maezumi Roshi, who was the teacher of Joko Beck, and then Joko Beck, who founded her own Zen school called Ordinary Mind Zen, who was the teacher of Barry Magid. And Barry Magid, of course, was my teacher. So I never really knew Joko Beck on a personal level. I had one telephone conversation with her once. So, as you know, the tradition has been mainly handed down to me by Barry Magid. And we're trying to articulate our own unique perspective on the Dharma. As most of you realize, the Dharma is vast and wide, or Buddhist studies are vast and wide. And you'll get many different viewpoints and many different perspectives and many different interpretations. So the perspective that I offer to you is influenced by my own tradition. So, life as a problem, and life as a koan.

Life as a problem

In some ways, we often view life as a problem to be solved. We are either living a successful life, a good life, or we feel we are a failure at living. Somehow we've fucked it up or messed it up in some way. We might try one self-improvement project after another. And that's fine, and they can work for a certain period of time. But in the end, we all come back to, and we all have to face, the inevitable reality of what in Buddhism we call impermanence and interdependence. Or no self, that is no fixed self. Everything is interconnected. Everything is interdependent. This is the basic reality we're all embedded in. And of course, we can always experience this reality as a form of suffering. And

especially when we resist impermanence and interdependence, we can amplify and magnify that suffering. We can add another layer of suffering on top of the layer of suffering we are already experiencing. When we get caught in our thoughts and we separate ourselves out from life, we get caught in our judgments, our opinions of how things should or shouldn't be. That adds another element of suffering. But the fact is, we are embedded in this life of impermanence and interdependence, and relationships with other human beings that ultimately are beyond our control. And the more we try to control them, the more we're going to suffer.

We were having a discussion on Friday morning in our Buddhism and psychotherapy discussion group. And I was relating the story, as I have done often in the past, of the myth of Sisyphus. It was a story that was discussed by the French existential philosopher Albert Camus. In one of his books, he wrote an essay on the myth of Sisyphus. And in a way, it's a kind of koan. In the myth, Sisyphus is a man who is being condemned by the gods to roll this boulder up a hill for the rest of eternity. And he rolls the boulder up the hill. And then, when he gets to the top, the boulder rolls back down and he walks back down the hill. And Camus uses this as a kind of metaphor for the absurdity of life. And we can view this as a metaphor for any kind of problems we are experiencing in our lives. For example, sometimes we may feel trapped or entrapped in a work situation we don't like. Or in some other situation we can't necessarily escape from. I think the story, in a way, is trying to get across this idea that pushing this boulder up the hill is something that Sisyphus cannot escape from. There's no escape. And I think that's kind of like a nice metaphor which summarizes our human condition. And the question it poses is, how do we cope with that situation? How do we cope with the inescapableness of this kind of suffering that we all experience? It's the basic kind of question the Buddha tried to

answer. And it's kind of like encapsulated in the five remembrances that we read out this morning.

Of course, as most of you know the story of the Buddha who, initially, after he saw outside the palace walls when he was walking through the township, he came across a sick person and then he came across a very old, frail person. And now, of course, he came across a corpse. These things are often talked about in Buddhism as a way of summarizing the inescapability of suffering: sickness, old age and death. And then, of course, he came across a mendicant and decided he will... Initially, his reaction to witnessing this human suffering was one of non-acceptance. His initial reaction was to reject suffering. And that's often a theme that comes up in our practice. Is there any place we can go to, to escape from this suffering? But, of course, when we read the five remembrances, it's very interesting. It's just basically relaying those basic three truths of existence:

I am of the nature to grow old. But then there is the second sentence which says *there is no way to escape growing old*.

I am of the nature to have ill health and there is no way to escape ill health.

I am of the nature to die and there is no way to escape death.

These are kind of like the necessities of life that we all have to face. None of us can escape these necessities. And then he adds the extra dimension of attachment suffering, which if we embrace lay practice, we're all going to suffer from. So,

All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. And there is no way, (again) to escape being separated from them.

So there's no way to escape being separated from people that we love and are attached to. And the final sentence of the five remembrances is quite interesting.

My actions are my only true belongings. And again,
I cannot escape the consequences of my actions.

So that's in a way we're all embedded in this universal impermanence and interdependence like the infinite sort of varieties of causes and effects that we're all, including our species, including our parents and their parents, including our culture. None of us can escape from that being embedded in all that karmic cause and effect. But when he says *my actions are the ground upon which I stand,* then there's something there about perhaps through our actions we can cultivate a way of responding to life that, to the best of our ability at least, ceases to do harm to ourself and others. And to me that is when something is inescapable, when suffering is inescapable, where I always find myself coming back to is *how do I transform this situation through compassion?* Compassion for myself, compassion for others. So I'm going to be talking about this in different ways this morning, about how we face the inescapable and how we can face the inescapable in a compassionate way.

So when we see life as a problem and it's okay, the habitual human response to problems is to try and solve them. And that's perfectly okay when it comes to, for example, fixing our car when it's broken down, if we can possibly find a solution to that. If we're suffering, if it's a really hot day we can perhaps go down to the beach and have a cool swim or turn on an air conditioner. Or if it's a really cold day we can put on an extra layer of clothing or put a fire on. In Buddhism we're no longer practicing asceticism, we're no longer deliberately bringing pain to ourselves. It's okay if we're feeling a lot of intense pain to take

some pain relief. There are lots of different ways. So there's lots of different ways we can deal with problems and do our best to resolve them. So we're not necessarily doing away with that. That's always going to be part of our life. But there are some existential, inescapable, necessary things that there's no necessary solution to. And that's the other dimension of what I call life as a koan. Sometimes we can't solve a problem. And life isn't necessarily a problem to be solved, it's a koan to be lived.

Life as a koan

But many of us treat our Zen practice as a self-improvement project because it's the kind of thing we tend to do. How do we find out if we're doing that? Because often it can be quite unconscious. And I'm not exonerating myself from this too. I think I still do that at times as well. It's something like, similar to therapy, when we have the expectation that psychotherapy is going to deliver us from the problems of life. That we're going to find some kind of lasting peace and happiness from a spiritual practice or from doing therapy. And like I was saying before, therapy can sometimes take us a certain way. It can maybe help us to resolve some problems. We can perhaps become less blaming of ourselves or less blaming of others. We can perhaps grow in our compassion. But ultimately, therapy is not going to, like Zen, is not going to resolve those basic existential conditions of life that we all have to face. And certainly, it's not going to resolve the fact that life is always going to be unpredictable and uncertain. Who knows what's going to happen tomorrow? Am I going to be walking across the road, perhaps daydreaming, and suddenly get run over by a car? This is the unpredictability and uncertainty of life which we can't escape.

So, if we think Zen is going to be something to fix all our problems, we're going to necessarily experience disappointment. So, my suggestion is to you, and it's

very common to feel some sense at times of disillusionment in therapy or disillusionment in a spiritual practice. And Zen is no exception. But with Zen, if we're starting to feel a sense of disappointment or disillusionment in our practice, it's possibly a sign that we are carrying some kind of secret and sometimes unconscious agenda. And so it's important to pay attention to that. We can play lip service to... We talk about our main core practice as just sitting, and we say this is a practice of no gain. We say Zazen is useless. We try and use these metaphors to get across this idea that we're not seeking something from our practice. We're not seeking to gain something. We're not seeking to become somebody other than who we already are. And often when we start to feel some sense of disappointment, it's usually because there's a hidden expectation there that we haven't made clear to ourselves. And that can happen to the most experienced of practitioners. It's not just beginners.

So, Zen can transform how we respond to the ups and downs of life, but it can't take away the ups and downs of life. It's not going to eradicate the ups and downs of life. So what is the alternative to treating life as a problem to be solved? That's life as a koan, life as a koan to be lived. So we ask these questions. What is this life? What is your life? What is my life? It's quite interesting and funny how life itself is the water that we're all in as fish. And the difficulty we have appreciating life, the difficulty we have appreciating this amazing moment-by-moment experience we're all having. And in Zen practice, this is basically the treasure that we're trying to point to. On the one hand, it's nothing special. On the other hand, it's everything we are. And ever will be. As long as we're alive. It's this life that we're living. And that's why, through our Zen practice, we try and encourage that sense of caring for ourselves. Caring for others. Caring for the environment. Because we realize how precious this life is. Which leads us to saying yes to life. It leads us to saying yes to life even when we're pushing that boulder up the hill. Even when

we're pushing that boulder up the hill, can we say yes to this moment? Because often in our lives, we do find ourselves saying *no*. That this isn't it. Rejecting this moment. This is not how I want my life to be.

Sometimes when we try and seek a meaning to life, it's not really the right question. We're not about trying to find a belief system. It's kind of like saying, what's the meaning of a flower? Just holding the flower up. We are life. We can't step outside of life. In that sense, what Zen is trying to convey is that life itself is the ultimate value. When we talk about, when you see in Zen books or koans, when they say this *great matter of life and death*, because there's no life without death, this great matter of life and death, that's what it's pointing to. We need to realize that's the koan that we're always living. To realize the preciousness of this treasure we call life.

When we're doing, we don't do koan practice as a system in our tradition. But the basic koan is the one of just simply asking, what is life? Or just, what is just sitting? Why are we just sitting? And rather than coming up with some meaningful answer, it's not about coming up with some solution to that. It's just about really living that question and realizing that through living it. Because we are already non-separate from life. We are already; there's nothing separates us from nirvana right here and now. It's only our thinking mind. It's our thinking mind which is always separating ourselves from ourselves in a way. Starts to step outside and starts to have this commentary and make all these judgments. Which separates us from our already at-one-ment with life itself.

So life is the ultimate value. But when we find ourselves saying *no* to life, it's a very slippery downward path to a kind of nihilism in a way. Where we can find ourselves in a really difficult place. Nihilism being the rejection of all values.

Because if life itself is the ultimate value, and we embrace life and we embrace saying yes to life, all the other values that we care about are embedded in that one ultimate act of affirmation. Whether we care about our families, is that a great important value for you? Whether your vocation is a value, whether your art or your craft is a value. Whether saving the planet is a value, whether the environment is a value. All these things that we value are all embedded in the one ultimate value stance of saying yes to life itself.

So life is seamless. This moment is seamless. We have to say yes to the whole of life. We can't just pick and choose. I want that, but I don't want that. But unfortunately, that tends to be the mechanism which drives a lot of our suffering. Because we're so used to having options, we're so used to having choices and preferences. And it's perfectly fine to have choices and preferences. But it's important that that mechanism doesn't run our lives all the time. Because if we think we've always got a preference, then we're going to run into trouble. Because when we start to hit upon these basic inescapable necessities of existence, there's no choice there. *The only choice we have is to embrace what is.* And to embrace what is, the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, coined the expression *Amor Fate*. Translated means to love our fate. We can read fate to mean life as it is. That which is given. That from which we cannot change. That from which we cannot escape. In one of his books he writes, “My formula for greatness in a human being is *Amor Fate*. Not just to bear the given, the necessary. Still less to conceal it. But to love it.” To love our life. To appreciate our life. We have to love all those parts of life which we dislike and find very difficult. We can't just have one without the other.

The Four Noble Truths or Tasks

So that brings us back again to the problem that the Buddha was most concerned with, which was suffering. He is quoted as saying, *I teach suffering*

and the end of suffering. What does he mean by the end of suffering? So the first teaching of the Buddha was on *the four truths* or *the four tasks*, as Stephen Batchelor calls them. There are different ways of interpreting these four truths or four tasks, depending on the tradition that we're in. For example, in early Buddhism, the goal of the path, the goal of nirvana, which is the fourth truth or the third task, may have really been literally extinction. In the belief system, which believed in reincarnation and that desire was bringing us back to be reincarnated over and over and over again. Then some early Buddhism could be interpreted as saying, well, let's get off that cycle forever. But that was rejected by the Mahayana teachings. And the notion of the Bodhisattva ideal that makes this commitment to be in love – to save all beings. It's also quite distinctive from Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of eternal recurrence. For him, the affirmation of saying yes to life is saying, I will live this life eternally over and over again. I will affirm and even say yes to that if I was to live this life over and over and over again. Another way sometimes in which the end of suffering or the nirvanic aspect of meditation practice can be interpreted is in some traditions emphasize a kind of absorption, a very deep absorption in jhanas or very deep meditative states. Where it may be possible to attain a state of bliss for a particular period of time, which certainly doesn't feel like suffering. But then that tends to set up a division within our lives between something we're wanting to identify as something which is preferable to something else. And ultimately, from our perspective, in Ordinary Mind Zen, that's not the way neither. Because in our practice, we want to be saying yes to every moment. So we don't have a goal-oriented practice like that.

So instead, I like to view the four truths or the four tasks as a kind of invitation to transform suffering into compassion, not to escape from suffering, but to transform suffering. Instead of resisting what is, to love what is, to love every moment of our lives beyond our preferences of likes and dislikes. It's not an

easy task. There are going to be times when that's not going to be possible for us, including me. But this is the teaching that I'm trying to convey. So just to summarize and bring this section to an end, so the four tasks or the four truths in Buddhism are:

1. Life is suffering, the problem. Suffering is to be understood or comprehended or witnessed from our perspective, witnessed when we are caught in a self-centered dream. Notice when we're suffering how we're caught in some kind of self-centered separation from life.
2. The second one, there is a cause of suffering or arising of suffering. Often the cause is seen as being attachment or aversion or ignorance. And then the teaching is the arising of suffering is to be let go of, or we might say in our Ordinary Mind Zen, let go of the holding onto self-centered thoughts.
3. The third one is the cessation of suffering, when we let go of attachment, aversion and ignorance. And the cessation of suffering is to be witnessed.
4. And the path is to be cultivated that leads to the cessation of suffering. But in our ordinary mind way, we say life as it is, is our only teacher. It's our great teacher. And being just this moment is compassion's way. So that's the great teaching of Joko's is that we embrace suffering. This moment is a moment of suffering and we transform that into compassion.
5.

   So we talk about being caught in a self-centered dream. This basic confusion about our true nature, which results in suffering generated by our resistance to basically accepting our true nature as impermanence and interdependence. That's what we are. That's what life is. And we can be basically in denial about who we really are. We are caught because we can be clinging to or attaching to or hating something which is ultimately impermanent and interdependent. It can be literally a form of self-hate, a rejection of impermanence and interdependence. This is, of course, because our true

nature is sometimes very painful. This is quite paradoxical because sometimes we must think that, well, isn't our true nature something which is beautiful and peaceful? No, our true nature can also be painful. And then we can seek to escape or forget our true nature. We can dissociate from our true nature. This is what we kind of mean by holding on to the self-centered dream. This is the forgetting or the flight from accepting who we truly are. So to wake up from the self-centered dream is to embrace our true nature, to transform this pain into acceptance of life as it is.

And Joko Beck had her own kind of version of the Two Arrows parable. And she was one of the first to formulate that formula: pain plus resistance equals suffering. And so Joko was one of the first to talk about it in that way. So as you know, I can't remember the details of the parable of the Two Arrows in the Buddhist literature. But it's something about a man's walking through a forest and he gets shot by an arrow. And he starts to ask the people around him all these kind of questions like, what was the arrow made of? Who shot the arrow? I don't know, all these kind of questions about the arrow. At the same time, he's suffering from the first arrow, but he's asking all these questions about the arrow. And one way of interpreting that parable is that's an example of what the Buddha was talking about - That we don't need to get involved in metaphysical speculation about what's ultimate reality, what's rebirth, what happens when I die. All those questions were irrelevant. The most important thing was how do I get some relief from this pain right now? The arrow is sticking in me right now. How do I address that? And in our particular culture, we tend to interpret the arrow story as all the different ways in which we try and avoid or resist experiencing pain. Hence increasing the pain or the suffering we may be experiencing. So here's Joko's version. I'll just give you a quote that I put in the newsletter this week.

Freedom is closely connected with our relationship to pain and suffering. I'd like to draw a distinction between pain and suffering. Pain comes from experiencing life just as it is, with no trimmings. We can even call this direct experiencing joy. But when we try to run away and escape from our experience of pain, we suffer. Because of the fear of pain, we all build up an ego structure to shield us, and so we suffer. Freedom is the willingness to risk being vulnerable to life. It is the experience of whatever arises in each moment, painful or pleasant. This requires total commitment to our lives. When we are able to give ourselves totally, with nothing held back, and no thought of escaping the experience of the present moment, there is no suffering. When we completely experience our pain, it is joy.

So that's Joko Beck. Maybe some of us wouldn't describe it as joy. Maybe I would rather say, when we completely experience our pain, compassion arises. When we completely experience something, we are being non-separate. We have closed the gap our self-centered thoughts create. And in being non-separate, we taste that boundlessness that the Heart Sutra talks about. That sense of an infinite space for our pain to be held. Not in our arms, maybe, but the arms of Avalokiteshvara, the manifestation of compassion.

However, it is true, we are not always going to be able to be just this moment, with every pain we experience. What happens when we resist? How do we practice with resistance? So, our practice includes resistance. We could say also, non-duality includes resistance. It includes duality. It includes delusion. Deluded beings are simply deluded Buddhas. This is also what Joko meant by to suffer intelligently. That is, how do we learn from our suffering? To suffer intelligently is to learn from our suffering. How do we learn from our resistance to life as it is?

Life as it is, the only teacher

So, for example, since my heart attack, I have been more vulnerable to fluctuations in mood. I have been catching myself saying no to life. Or if not saying no, sometimes feeling entrapped by my situation. Not having very much money, as you know. And also facing the possibility of only having a few years left. It can sometimes feel a bit scary and a bit entrapment. And this can be sometimes found in the kind of thoughts that will sprout up in my mind. And catching myself when I get caught in these self-centered thoughts, such as the sense of either feeling a bit trapped, or feeling I don't have the possibilities I had when I was younger. That kind of tendency when I feel I'm trapped. This can create a sort of maybe a feeling of self-pity or regret. Or even resentment. It's kind of like, you know, after 30 or 40 years of Zen practice, sometimes feeling, actually nothing much has changed. This can breed disillusionment. These old patterns coming back after all these years of practice. I can also get into maybe blaming my younger self for being irresponsible for all my troubles. Or maybe I could blame somebody else. But at times I've been able also to let that one go. Forgive myself. When I catch myself, that is when I become mindful of these thought processes, I have two kinds of realizations that often follow. One is that I can pretty clearly say, with honesty, I don't get angry and hurt people as much as I did when I was younger. That's one thing, I think, one benefit of my practice. I think I can honestly say that. And I'm grateful for that. And another realization I have, and it's very subtle, but it's kind of like no longer rejecting the resistance in a sense. It's okay. It's okay to have this sense of resistance coming up. It's okay to feel depressed sometimes. It's okay to feel trapped. I can't say I would feel okay to everything that happened to me. Like one of Joko's definitions of enlightenment, she just goes through this list of things, really, really bad things happening. Like if you lost both your legs, would

that be okay? Ultimately, if a tiger was to eat you, would that be okay? I'm not saying I'm going to be okay with everything. But I can say that that sense of okayness does come round. And I realize that. And when I realize it's okay to feel that, Andrew, there tends to be a sense of compassion arising from that. And this is what just sitting teaches us as well. We just sit. And who we are is whatever is present, right there and then. The sense of being face to face with ourselves, uniting with ourselves, closing that gap, with judgment and opinions, we tend to divide ourselves from ourselves. But we close the gap in our just sitting practice. You just sit, feel your breath, and your face, whatever it is, whatever is this moment just naturally arises every moment and changes moment by moment. And then we can learn to pay attention to how we're often saying no or rejecting what is arising. When we are saying no, this isn't me, or this isn't how life should be happening right now.

How do we clarify this in our practice? How do we clarify when we get caught up in self-centered thoughts, like this shouldn't be happening to me? Well, we start to experience that sense of dissatisfaction or suffering, which arises when we're caught up in rejecting the present moment. If we are mindful, this is the teaching of life as it is. This is life teaching us about suffering. We can always count on life will teach us all about suffering. Or as Barry says to me, we start by recognizing the rejection of the present moment. But then we step back and see that rejection is how we are in the present moment. And that too is the absolute, right? That the anger, the anxiety is this moment. So we're not noticing it with the intention of trying to get ourselves into a different place. But to make even the rejection, you know, a moment of this is it, right? Rejection or anxiety or anger are all versions of presence. That's what's present right now. And the rejection is what's present right now. It's no different from being non-separate from the

bird call or the sound of the cars or the movement of the breath. Then when we talk about the gap which arises or the sense of separation which arises when we're rejecting this. When we awake to this process, the rejection itself becomes part of the landscape. It's just like the bird or the traffic noise. It's being caught in judgmental thoughts that creates the sense of separation and hence of suffering. The rejection is, you know, that goddamn traffic noise. That goddamn bird. I wish it would be quiet so I could sit here peacefully. So there's a trying to push away some part of experience. Anger is always, I suppose, has a thought of it shouldn't be this way, right? Irritation contains the idea that things aren't the way they're supposed to be. But I want them to be. Then at the meta level, we recognize those feelings themselves as just elements of what's happening this moment.

So it's okay to have preferences. It's okay to apply a bandage to a wound, to take pain relief, to put your jumper on when it gets cold and to take your jumper off when it gets warm. *But the point is not to be attached to the expectation that we are always going to be able to choose different preferences.* Sometimes we won't have a jumper to put on and off. And what happens then?

So just to conclude, transforming suffering into compassion is the form in which we can talk about freedom from suffering or nirvana. So this is a quote from Maezumi Roshi, the teacher of Joko Beck.

We do not see that our life, right here, right now, is nirvana. Maybe we think that nirvana is a place where there are no problems, no more delusions. Maybe we think nirvana is something very beautiful, something unattainable. We always think that nirvana is something very different from our own life. But we must really understand that nirvana is right here, right now.

It couldn't be any other place.

How is that possible, he says? We can say that our practice is to close the gap between what we think our life is and our actual life. As the subtle mind of nirvana, or more to the point, how can we realize that there is really no gap to begin with?

So therefore, suffering is not a problem to be solved. As Barry says, in some ways it's inescapable, and in some way we're simply going to have to change our perspective on its nature and change our perspective on what it means to be free of suffering. So in this particular talk I'm offering you transforming suffering into compassion as a way in which we can work with our suffering, a way in which we can view our suffering. So nirvana is freedom from suffering, but this is freedom from the resistance to life as it is, and freedom in the midst of resistance as it is. It's not freedom from pain or even from suffering. It is liberation from all obstacles by accepting all obstacles. *Amor fati*, to love each moment as it is. We live out the life of our true self by staying with life as it is, which is impermanence and interdependence. Or we resist our true self, which results in suffering. And this teaches us over and over again that there is no escape, and ultimately our only choice is to be aware and present to this moment, this treasure, which is our life.