

Samish Talk: The Three Dharma Seals

Sunday, June 19, 2022

2:01 PM

[source on the smallpox epidemic of 1862:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_smallpox#Epidemics_in_the_Americas]

Good morning. Well it seems we more or less remember how to do this. Amazing. [welcome pe
sorry to Kate, Michael, Chris that they can't be here, grateful we didn't lose more of our dear fr
containment and thank goodness none of these dear friends are in immediate danger. We hop
soon.]

And now into the container of silence I have many words I'm afraid. I studied with the best on t
how to give long wordy Dharma Talks. I don't seem to be able to do otherwise so thank you in a
presence and listening. As always with a talk don't worry about it: let it all flow through you. Th
be explained really anyway. But if something snags in a useful way that's just fine too.

Happy Juneteenth. An important step, I hope, that we now have a Federal holiday recognizing t
slavery. Although: this is the America of today I also read that there are 30 states who haven't t
to implement Juneteenth like funding the day off for state workers.

The slave trade and diaspora from Africa has impacts all over the world, and even that just one
larger story of how the core issues of greed, hatred, and delusion in humans has manifested.

I want to start our first talk of sesshin with an exploration of this lovely, powerful place. Those v
coming a while are aware of this stuff but it bears renewing our attention to when we come ba
some of us are here for the first time.

This is a place I, and many of us, truly love. The Community of Christ have been here for almost
when two of their members helped them acquire the property. There is a picture of Sig and To
82 acres of their property on Samish Island to the church in 1958 on the bulletin board. It was
large summer reunions. They have the church organized into regions - called stakes - and each
gather her for a week. They still do but the gatherings are much smaller these days. There wou
for the kids and church meetings and discussion and mostly I think just a lot of fellowship - a lo
They'd have 300 or more people here living together for a week. The building we're in is on the
a large barn when they first got here - the big gathering space. Must've been pretty chilly at tim

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was just summer pretty much when they came. Eventually they tore down the barn, it was fall to build this building which they call the Christian Fellowship Center - CFC and when we're around to translate and call it the zendo for us. One time Norman called it "the basketball church" - same thing many different names. And it's interesting how a different name does give something a different meaning.

But there were people way longer than 55 or 100 years of course. The Samish Nation was here for a long time longer. Several of you I'm sure read the display they made for the dining hall here. There was a 100th anniversary of the Camp and they were kind enough to attend and share, they brought that the building has kept it up ever since.

Science suggests they were here up to 10,000 years. Where were your ancestors 10,000 years ago? The Samish just say they've been here since the beginning. We've had the privilege of meeting a few members of the tribe over the years and Bob Rose actually just reached out to the current Tribal Chairman to help us re-connect. I'll never forget the one time a few tribal members came to one of our ceremonies to apologize to their ancestors for what happened here. After the ceremony she stood right there and gave some appreciation back with us in the Samish language. Do you remember that? It was bone ti...

This was a winter village site. They were pretty mobile through the islands the rest of the year, foraging, gathering, getting everything set and then the winter was a relaxed time. A time of staying put. I remember reading that some Coast Salish peoples had different names in winter to support seasonal activities as a different time. Different names for people, just like for buildings do change things.

And also right about here where this building stands, where the barn stood before, they had a long building. A long, low building made of cedar. Many families lived inside over the winter. And that space had a name too. Different buildings, different names. All right here.

One thing I've been thinking lately is about which history I know, and which I don't know, living in America because it's "America" I know an important document signaling our independence from England on July 4, 1776. Everyone who grew up in America knows that. But do we know other important documents I learned recently which I feel I should have known living in what's also the home of Salish people? The 1855 Treaty of 1855: when the Point Elliot Treaty was signed, beginning the process of taking away much of our independence.

Ceding most of the lands they lived on, gathered on, travelled through in exchange for the fixed reservations. The Lummi acknowledge January 22nd every year as Treaty Day. I watched a really good video they produced for the Ferndale School District where many of their children go to school along with the decedents of the settlers. They talk in the video about how much they respect and honor their ancestors who negotiated and signed that treaty: the wisdom to read the situation with the incoming white settlement and come up with that treaty. And the agreement was... And then they talk about the land but the...

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government and save what they could. And to prevent war. And they talk about the loss but it has been so much worse. That they are still here.

My favorite part is talking to the long-time Ferndale families: "Every year on Treaty Day we think about our ancestors and I know you think about your ancestors, too. Many of your families have been here for 3 or even 4 generations now. That's wonderful. We've been here for many hundreds of generations. Of course much of what was promised to them, and other groups of Indian nations in the other treaties, was not given to them or was later taken away. So many broken promises. So January 22nd - Treaty Day - Juneteenth.

But before we get into the Buddhism bit of today's talk I want to add another year we should be celebrating being here, and especially those of us who live here.

I just learned that we actually know exactly how smallpox came to the area.

But the horrible new learning in this for me is I always thought - I must have been taught - that the story with smallpox was that native people had no immunity to it while the Europeans and their ancestors had it all an element of bad luck, unfortunate circumstances. This turns out to be only partly true, but the real story is more complex and more terrible.

White people *were* vulnerable too but I guess there was some level of herd immunity and serious death was less likely in the white population while it was very likely for native folks. But the thing is that Western society understood Smallpox well enough to slow or stop outbreaks. There was an effort to create the first one created, developed in 1796, and communities were pretty effective at using quarantine to stop spread. But very little of this was offered to the native community. There was some I read. One doctor, Dr. Helmcken, vaccinated over 500 people in a tribal group called the Songhees on Vancouver Island and they suffered very little loss. But overall up and down the region about half of Coast Salish people died of Smallpox with some groups experiencing much worse.

The horrible point being that many of those deaths could have been prevented by vaccination and quarantine practices that the white settlers had access to. The settlers protected themselves and managed to survive the health crisis of smallpox which *was* dangerous for them too, but with some exceptions like Dr. Helmcken. For example the dominant feeling was this was a handy way to get rid of the Indians.

Smallpox arrived in the region in Victoria, B.C., on a passenger steamship in 1862. The authorities recognized it quickly and had access to vaccine but it was almost exclusively white people who were vaccinated. Victoria was a major trading hub and there were many First Nations people who were camped at Victoria and did town stuff - over 2,000 native folks were there, but as people started getting sick Vancouver authorities forced them to leave. Of course they went home to their villages and people and the

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I'm sorry to share this with you but I think it's important to bear witness to it. This was an editor's column in the *Townsend newspaper* from May 1862:

"The Indians are a loathesome and indolent race, of no earthly use to themselves or any community — save the doctors — and their presence gathers and retains a set of graceless vagabonds, who ... get a precarious living by peddling villainous whisky among them. ... The lepers are far worse than the small pox. In ridding ourselves of one, we no longer encourage the other. Let the Indians be sent to the Reservations where they belong ... [and then] our natural resources will rapidly develop, society would improve and strengthen, and free-love and atheism find fertile ground on the shores of Puget Sound" (May 24, 1862, p. 2).

I don't know all the details of how it progressed for Coast Salish peoples around here but there is a report of a village here in the Skagit Valley where just about everyone died of small pox. I have a clear image in my head - from something I read - of a settler entering a village to find only a few children left. And the Samish Nation was among those most devastated - their sign says their entire population was reduced 90% which is about as bad as it got.

A result of all of this is that when settlers arrived in increasing waves in the 1880's and 1890's and early 20th century: they came into a land that had already been largely depopulated by disease. Made it hard for them to understand the practices of the Indian population either. No one here: I'll start my farm - not knowing that that land had been burned annual to promote camas bulb production and that folks would be back in the Fall to harvest it. Indian camas farmers in a farm house. So many layers the story of the enormous cultural change here. 150 years ago isn't that long really. I'm kind of proud of being in Bellingham over 30 years into the entire history of Euro-american habitation of this land. Hard to get my mind around that.

Somehow when we first sat sesshin here we tuned into this fact - one of our members had some powerful visions in the middle of the night actually. And ever since we've done ceremonies here each time apologizing for being a part of the culture that brought such pain, dislocation, loss of their land and straight up death. Genocide.

In this time of pandemic it does feel worth taking a minute as we sit on this land to think about the pandemic, doesn't it? To bear witness and broaden our perspective. Covid has been terrible in our time but it's nothing like that.

It's good to know where you are I think. Lovely place, it's always felt like a deep place for practicing

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place where tremendous suffering has happened. Maybe that's true pretty much everywhere. Suffering and I'm sure so many millennia of joy and connection and every other human emotion.

So gratitude to the Samish Nation, thank you for allowing us to be here in whatever way you are surviving and tolerating this greedy hateful culture that swept down on you 150 years ago. I hope you're better now.

And gratitude to the Community of Christ for sharing the place with us. Thank you to Shawna who's working really hard holding this place together. Thank you to Christina for jumping in to be camp in the summer. Thank you to Laura and Jim Fish and their nephew Kennedy for making us wonderful. Thank you to those who insisted on being our cook again when the schedule for the reopening of Samish was first coming together.

And thank you to the swallows and the herons and the eagles and terns and waxwings and warblers who share the space with us too. No matter what each of our challenges are in life there is much to be grateful for here? So much.

And of course I worry this was all TOO MUCH to this bring up. We're here to be together and practice in a wonderful way. Do we really need to contemplate the horrors from history? But I trust our big hearts can do all of that and include in our hearts some appreciation and some sorrow for how it all got here and make some progress anyway. I'm sure you can find sentiments like in that 1862 newspaper editorial on our websites but thankfully that kind of racism is so much less prevalent, if sadly not gone from this world again, happy Juneteenth everyone.

Maybe on way to look at this is some sense of responsibility to really use our practice time well as a way of honoring those who sacrificed so much. And also a way of honoring the many, many people who supported each of us more directly. It's worth taking a minute to think of some of the people who made it possible for you to be here. [pause]

And while we're here, appreciating the blessing of getting to be here for the week, how should we practice? How should we orient ourselves? How should we make the best use of this time of practice?

Well Buddhism has so many suggestions for us and I thought we'd explore two of Buddhism's main teachings this morning. The first from early Buddhism is The Three Dharma Seals, and another set of three from Mahayana Buddhism: The Three Doors of Liberation which really support the first set.

The Three Dharma Seals are: impermanence, non-self, and nirvana. These get increasingly obscure as we'll unpack them. impermanence, non-self, and nirvana. This teaching suggests that any teaching with depth will include three aspects, three seals. "Dharma" here refers to authentic teaching, practice of putting these teachings to use. These are called *sanpai* in Sino-Japanese.

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And the three doors of liberation are emptiness, signlessness, and aimlessness.

Let's keep our focus on the first three and I have a few suggestions about how the second three practice of these.

The first Dharma Seal of Impermanence makes sense and we've contemplated it many times: e changes, exploring change, exploring and appreciating how temporary absolutely everything is conversation over dinner the other day about hospice work and appreciating the challenging tr temporary each of us is. My friends and I at the table in our 50's and into 60's and starting to fe clearly how our years remaining are fewer than they were. An uncomfortable feeling but it can inspiration: how do I show up for my life more fully from now? Not wanting to let the remainin of slide on by.

That's a wise shift in us: to hold and remember that our years are fleeting. I must admit seeing friends here after 3 stressful years I did notice that we all look quite a bit older don't we? Who longer each of us has.

And yet this is also a kind of impermanence lite isn't it? Well I'll probably live into my mid 80's o 56 from that and that's how long I have. Ok, that's not bad. Plenty of time to do many of the th in this life. And I'm back to putting death at arm's length. I have heard of plenty of people who at right around my age. I'll never forget how stricken Norman was when his dear friend Allen Le 65.

Later is a fantasy. I didn't know yesterday if I would be here today, I couldn't know that. It was guess since I'm not aware of anything wrong with the body and a fatal accident here at the cam unlikely. But that's only thinking, or not thinking: assuming without thinking about it. And our c among the many fantasies we each hold about what's supposed to happen in the future.

Maybe Covid loosen up our believe in our future fantasies a little in the many ways it's show us what's going to happen" but these are persistent beliefs in us.

And sesshin is a powerful and rare opportunity to study this. To study it right here on the groun each moment that arises. To notice how fluid and changing everything is, everything. And we c clearly in this quiet concentrated environment the tension that comes form trying to make thin predictable to our particular liking. A kind of avoiding, not seeing, and even fighting with chang suffering from resisting change is a great pointer back to the teaching of impermanence.

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And this isn't a bummer thing. One of my inspirations here is a little book from a retreat Thich Nhat Hanh in 1992. Here's what he says about the joy of practicing with impermanence [p68-70 *Cultivating Love*]
Long live impermanence!

So setting these issues we see as so big, like death, aside we can practice deeply with change right now. Samish, today. Watch your mind states, watch them change. Watch the light of the day as the clouds move steadily on it's axis: how it changes. Birds that were fortunate to grow to adulthood fly by: one was not a bird there, then there is, then there isn't. Miraculous that birds exist, miraculous that all happens within the web of impermanence and change. Without change none of this can be. we can't be.

Impermanence can feel like a deep challenge but it can also feel like a great relief. Maybe you got into a horrid mind state at some point today like we were talking about last night. You try to cheer yourself up, you change the subject in your mind - that's our habit - but that doesn't work. And the more you push yourself the worse you can feel even if you do manage to avoid the pitfall of the predicting and worrying mentioned where you make it worse by believing that the rest of the rest will be horrible.

A great blessing of retreat there is the structure and support to hang in there. Not to jump up and down on yourself. To stay with it. And, usually, soon or later: it changes. The mood lifts, your attitude changes, you're okay again. What happened? Did I do that? Did God or Buddha or someone out there do something to my neurochemistry?

But again a blessing of retreat is to drop out of all of that thinking and analyzing and trying to fix things and just returning to experience itself. A bad mood was here, now it's flown away like one of those clouds. Like the sun breaking through the clouds can feel so amazing, which is the impermanence of weather.

Sometimes we benefit from thinking of moods and thoughts like weather you know? Just the impermanence of the mind. Most of us prefer a mildly warm sunny day to a cold rainy day but it's not that big of a deal. It's out really is it? You put on your layers and carry on with your day. Can we bring that attitude to our changing inner weather too. That's a practice of appreciating impermanence.

Part of why we hold onto our beliefs in permanence is that we aren't really looking at ourselves. We're looking at our concepts. We have to train ourselves to look more deeply is how Thich Nhat Hanh says. Is that really what I think it is or am I just seeing what I usually see, seeing what I expect to see, really looking carefully.

Sesshin is such a powerful opportunity to tune in. And we do we approach the 2nd practice in the

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mentioned: the practice of signlessness. Signs in Buddhist phenomenology are the concepts we use to describe reality with. At Red Cedar we studied the Diamond Sutra this last Winter a text which does its best to shake us loose from our belief in signs. From being content with mere concepts like Buddhas and

"What do you think, Subhuti? Can the Tathágata be recognized by the possession of the thirty-two marks?"

The Venerable Subhuti replied, "No, World-Honored One. Why? Because what the Tathágata has, those thirty-two marks are not essentially marks

See the real Buddha, not just the Buddha you think you see from your concepts and ideas of Buddha. In anything there's a stability to our concepts: a Buddha's a Buddha. It's making something that's beyond anything into a thing. It's limiting Buddha. Maybe degrading Buddha. And that's limiting our potential, hampering our growth.

And get curious about the real Buddha which isn't the concept of Buddha, get curious about the real me which isn't the concept of me, and the real world around you which isn't the concept of world (and all the things in the concept of "around you"). Which brings us to the second of the three Dharma Seals: not self.

This can seem more subtle: non-self or not-self. And I definitely find it harder to talk about in a

I know how to say something like: this week in sesshin you can look at this self we've each constructed in our lives, built up from childhood, culture, the many inputs of our parents, our choices and experiences, a myriad influences, this sense of me that feels so solid and me-like, what they mean is that sense of self. Isn't so real and fixed as we think it is. We can feel the way impermanence weaves its way in here and there, how the very idea of "me" or "Tim" is a sign which sits like a hazy screen in front of the signlessness of that's really "me".

But that's just talk.

The practice here might be a great application for curiosity. Is this really what I am? Might I be something more? Not so limited by who I think I am?

A great place to study this in retreat is when you feel really convinced about something, have a goal that's flowing from your sense of who you are. Or of what's supposed to happen. That's part of our funny little guideline about what to do with your smart suggestions for improving the retreat: don't hold that fixed view, even if it's brilliant and quite correct, and drop back into the flow of sesshin.

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Judgment is another great place to study not-self. That's why we judge. We judge others to create a point for ourselves. We judge others to say I'm not like that, I'm like this. We judge others to create a point for ourselves.

So not-self is freedom. Not self is allowing. Not self is fluid.

This gets into a bit tricky territory because it's not like we can shed all of our past trauma and our hang ups just by switching up our attitude and learning some Buddhist teaching and doing a lot of practice and try and it can end up doing them harm. That stuff has its power and reality, and we need to take care of ourselves, to know ourselves, to heal too, but what these teaching on non-self is suggesting is that over time none of that is as solid and fixed and binding as our minds think it is. It too is a bunch of signs and signlessness with impermanence and with not-self.

I love the Yogachara teaching of the Alayavijñana to help us understand past trauma and suffering and its impacts on us. When conditions are right for those seeds to sprout, hold onto your hat, the suffering can be very powerful. Dangerous even. Take care of yourself. But it's also just seeds in the storehouse and there are many others down there. No need to define yourself with your past trauma either. When it arises, just notice it, that's enough.

At our apparently heavy and serious sesshin we can practice not-self by holding ourselves lightly. Smile a little, it's okay. Keep breathing. Don't try so hard to figure anything out. Dance a little (we don't usually boogie in the zendo), push through less. Take a fresh look at your story - your stories as they come up. Oh! That's the story I tell myself about who I am. I wonder.... Hold it lightly. Take care of yourself less, be whatever the process of arising is more.

Which is why I encourage myself and all of us to be light with our expectations at sesshin. Sometimes things do happen here. Probably something quite valuable. But our mind's attempts to predict what that will be, our expectations of what it should be from before, are just another emanation of our fixed story of self.

And that brings in the third of the Doors of Liberation: aimlessness. Let go of your aim towards a specific outcome. Notice if the self wants something from this practice - it'll be the fixed self for sure. Notice the clinging of that and practice releasing it again. Suzuki Roshi's no gaining idea. Norman used to joke "you know what's great about our practice?" pregnant pause for us to wonder what great jewel he was revealing, and then he'd say "It's absolutely useless."

I can't imagine a better situation for the practicing and deepening into aimlessness. Take refuge in the fact that there's nothing to do this week, nothing to solve, nothing to analyze or sort out. And no one to help with solving, analyzing, and sorting. Release from all of that. Into breath. Into this moment. Into gaze. Into a clear and remarkable view. In hearing the wind and the birds. Into tasting Laura's wonderful cooking. Into noticing the quirks of your neighbors.

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The last of the three Dharma Seals usually leave in the Sanskrit: nirvana. This sounds like the middle of the three but actually we can't boil this one down to one word: stop. Nirvana points to all kinds of things, but its essence is just that: stop.

Which is what we're doing here at the root isn't it? We're stopping. Disconnecting. Dialing it down from our busy lives full of responsibilities to others, stop that for a while. Just stop see what happens. "Smell the roses," we say in English. We usually hear that like, "yes yes it'd be good to have more time to smell the beauty of life, to smell those wonderful roses." And we put the roses first. I guess that's our intention again: right, I want to smell more roses, that'll be good for me.

But this teaching might say more like: "sure, there's nothing wrong with smelling the roses, but the important part there is the stopping part."

Why does this help? Stop there too. No need to figure that out. Just stop. See what it feels like, what happens. It would be silly to try to explain this with lots of words triggering lots of busy thoughts. The essential point is stopping.

That's what the silence practice is about. It's stopping. That's what the structures and constraints of a schedule are about: stopping.

So how about this apparent you in the middle of all of these supports and structures? Are you still there?

Of course we all have our habits. And they propel us forward. We find ourselves in the middle of things in our mind trying to straighten someone out. Or halfway through a note to the Ino about how things should be run here - oops. And then we remember, again, to stop.

So let's practice this way this week and see. I think these three seals of the Dharma are really powerful and useful: worthy of bringing out attention to again and again: being open to change, impermanence, softening up around our rigidly constructed self, and stopping. Really stopping.

And if these supporting later teachings are helpful here they are again: I mentioned signlessness, aimlessness. Signlessness: not mistaking our concepts of things for the real things (if there are any) and aimlessness: releasing from striving and goal. The third of the Three Doors of Liberation which is often mentioned in Zen is emptiness.

Emptiness not as an idea or a clever teaching point here but emptiness as seeing clearly that it's not what we think it is. It's vaster, more fluid, richer, and more wondrous than we ever imagined. As Thich Nhat Hanh says:

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John Muir said this beautifully:

"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe

Anything. Everything. The whole universe is there. Can you feel this?

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