

2001-05-14: Death Penalty Discussion

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsda

Rainbow maid

has been recurrent in the history of Buddhism in that one of the common, not the most common, but one of the things you find in the history of Buddhism in Asia, is periodically there'll be a Buddhist King or Buddhist ruler that will take over a country like King Ashoka in India and kings in China, sometimes in Korea, I don't know about Japan, and they would outlaw the death penalty because of their Buddhist faith. There's a very strong streak in Buddhism in the direction of Ahimsa or non violence. And it takes the form not only non violence in terms of the avoidance of capital punishment, but also the avoidance of killing any living being. King Ashoka, who was the first Buddhist ruler in India around the year 300 Hundred bc or so he not only outlawed the death penalty, but he also stopped all aggressive wars, he maintained a defensive army. He probably felt like he needed to because he had been a very vicious conquer, before he was converted the story goes that in one of his vicious conquering of much of India, one of his battles, he walked across the battlefield after the battle had been one with most of the soldiers dead on the battlefield. And it was carnage of blood and limbs and death fell around people screaming, I guess still in agony. And across that field. After the battle, there walked a Buddhist monk, whose way he carried himself, his peace of serenity, his compassion, his some something about the way he was in this very dramatic setting, caught the attention of the king of the ruler. And converted him changed and changed the whole direction of his life. And he then gave up a war and instituted led many humanitarian projects. And he's held up as the Great example in history of Buddhism of the just ruler. There's a story that maybe many of you know about. There was a man by the name of Ahimsa, which means non violence, who was a student, it was a Brahmin, in ancient India, time of the Buddha, and he was a student of a famous romanichal teacher. And the teacher had many students, and I himself was the favorite students, he excelled above everybody else. And at some point, the other students became jealous. And so they want to do something to fix the situation. So they told the teacher That ahimsa admin sleeping with his wife. And the teacher was furious and

then banished himself from the school and kicked him out and said I will not accept you back until you bring me a necklace that contains fingers, thousand fingers of 1000 people that you kill.

This is somehow his punishment.

I don't know how he you know he thought about the people who are dying.

So this man then went about India killing people and he was quite ruthless and quite successful. And there was many attempts to try to capture him and stop him and kill him but he was somehow was able to overcome the various armies and whatever sent out from him.

And he acquired the name of Aṅgulimāla. And Aṅgulimāla means finger necklace, because he had this necklace of all these fingers quite gruesome. And he needed 1000 fingers. And he had 999.

And he was walking out in in the forest where he lived. And

somehow it occurred to him that his mother was an easy target.

And no matricide and patricide is considered to be one of the worst possible evils in Buddhist tradition that you can do.

So, with his great

abilities, that Buddha somehow perceived he's perceived that he could, that this was going about this terrible thing was gonna have And actually the awful thing. So the Buddha decided to intervene. And the villagers said, Oh, don't go into the forest because this Aṅgulimāla he just doesn't stop with anything and you can't defend yourself against him. And the Buddhists just went anyway and unclear while I was walking down through the forest, and Aṅgulimāla then saw this Buddhist monk, and he said, Oh good. This is an easy prey, these monks, you know, they can't defend themselves and this will be really easy and I finished my assignment and I can go back to my teacher and great and so he started going after the Buddha. And the Buddha was walking calmly down the road. And the faster Aṅgulimāla went, some point he was running, the further the Buddha was from him. And then he was running quite fast and so the Buddha couldn't get in and the Buddha was the opposite. And so, finally Aṅgulimāla yelled out stop and The Buddha continued calmly walking and he said, You stop. I stopped long ago. And this kind of turn of phrase caught dangle molar's attention enough that somehow into his psyche and he understood it, I think maybe symbolically that the Buddha had stopped. Maybe you'd say, greed or hate or violence, he had stopped the neurosis a psychosis of his mind all the different forces of greed, hate and delusion. And his mind was at peace. Whereas unbelievable his mind was driven and running and furious

in pain

and so the Buddha said, you know, I've already stopped Why don't you stop? So Aṅgulimāla then they're there that very moment gave up his ways and, and was ordained as a Buddhist monk. So, the local King didn't didn't know this so the local King was still set on capturing this or killing this mass murder. So he came into the forest with a huge army of people to look for him. And in the forest up first, at some point it came upon the Buddha surrounded by his monastic disciples, as monks and nuns. And

and since the monastics spend much of their time in the forest, he thought these are people maybe to ask if they've seen Angulimala.

So he came up to the Buddha. And the Buddha was sitting there quietly and within attendance behind him, fanning him because it was a hot season perhaps. And the king said, Have you seen Angulimala the Great murder?

And the Buddha said something like, what would you do if you saw him? Oh, I would get my army out and we do pull out our swords and we would surround that guy before. A chance and we would just do them in.

And the Buddha said,

and what would you do if you found out that Angulimala had renounced his ways, had become a renunciant had entered the Buddhist order of monastics, and was seriously engaged in a life of non violence, and a life of spiritual change, transformation.

And the king said, Oh, in that case, I would bow down to him and leave him alone. And the Buddha said, Well, this attendant behind me who's spending these Aṅgulimāla, I wish point that kings here stood on end. And he was very frightened. But he saw that this was a monk and he had enough confidence or trust in the Buddha, that if the Buddha had taken this man in to be a renunciant, it wasn't just a ploy or a trick, but this really was involved in some radical transformation. And so he left him and by the king at least, he was not forgiven, but at least left to live this new life.

As a story goes on,

Angulimala then continue the spiritual practice and attained the highest attainment of full liberation. That person could attain

and

became not only a force of,

of peace and non violence but also a source of compassion for the people he met, compassionate action. But one day he was out for his morning alms rounds, which the Buddhist monastics do every morning. And he happened to walk through the village, one of the villages we had killed a lot of people and the people recognized him. And so they threw stones on him and bruised him quite a bit came back to the Buddha all bruised and bloody. And the other monks were kinda a little bit surprised and they said to But how could this be he's he's someone who's attained full liberation free from all suffering. And how could something like this happened to him that he got stoned? And the Buddha said, Oh, he certainly has severed all this past evil. He's eradicated all that and uprooted it. And he's radically transformed. And he's now force of goodwill and peace in the world. But he's not free of his past karma. The past cons of the kinds of consequences the social consequences of the action, the way people feel hurt and angry and upset and are still there he is still incense has the best part of the field of his life. And he can't just simply his his personal transformation doesn't change those relationships automatically. And so he has to bear it, but he bears it patiently. The Buddha said, he still has to live by us live by his karma, but since he's fully liberated, he endures it patiently. What's the expression so Angulimāla is often the story is often held up for People who want to avoid, do away with a death penalty. And in fact, in England, there's a fairly large Buddhist group, or Buddhist minister is named Christian charity called the ministry, ministering to people in prisons, prisoners. And that group in England is called Aṅgulimāla. They've adopted that name for the group. And, in part, it's held up as an example of how people can be transformed and changed. that people can be redeemed is the right word, but they can be transformed and changed radically and, and completely make a complete change and switch from the way they were before. Even though at times they seem to express some of the worst evil that human being can, can engage in. Whether that can happen all every time, I don't know. I don't know if anybody knows it, everyone can be changed and transformed. There was there was a debate later in Indian Buddhism about whether whether there were such people who for whom it was impossible for them to make any spiritual progress, if such people exist, or at all and there were different sides that point of view. The people who thought they were were such people called such people. It shouldn't take us. I don't know what the word means. But the definition is those who have no spiritual hope for them. But certainly there's a strong current that many people can be transformed and changed. In my kind of thinking about this today and thinking back in my training in Asia, and how the teachings I got there, how might you relate to the issue of death penalty? I think some of my teachers would have not would first not have considered the redemptive possibility of the killer, but would have first considered the karmic consequences Have the executioner that if even if you can have capital punishment, someone has to do the executing. And in Buddhism, it's very serious karma it's very bad, very horrible things for your karma for your well being for your inner psychic life to be involved in killing someone. And for someone to guess it Timothy McVeigh situation, the executioner will be a volunteer the people involved in the prison there are mostly in America. I think nowadays it's prison, the prison personnel volunteer for these positions. But still, it's a whether what it however whatever reason it's there. They even though it's condoned or prescribed by society, this action has to happen. The person who actually injects the poison

is taking on a tremendous karmic

debt are a karmic consequence for themselves. So the agent teachers would have been horrified by what was going on. happened to the executioner that this, you know, excuse me or knew what they were taking on, they would never get close to committing execution. So that I think I believe that's often the first thought they would come in perhaps that's because the data has been done. Awful as it is, but they're looking at what can be done now. And one of the next things practical things is, well, let's avoid this horrible thing is going to happen next, which is the, the horrible karma for the executioner now to speak of the, perhaps the suffering of the person being killed

when I was in Asia, also remember in Burma, one of the

wasn't that wasn't that often. But one of the more because we didn't have common themes that much but in the Dharma talks, but one of the recurring themes we did have was my teacher like to tell stories about people, Burmese people came to his monastery, who had horrific backgrounds and their experience in meditation and He would get people who came from both the army who are the Burmese army is pretty vicious, and kill and torturing lots of people. But also the, the rebel groups are fighting the army just as bad. And they would do a lot of killing and torturing and sometimes both sides with some some individual from both sides would give up that life and become a monastic or come into the monastery which was kind of a freemen zone and be engaged in spiritual practice. And he would talk about how difficult it was the tremendous obstacles they had to face based on what they had done in the past that those actions that killing created tremendous psychic blocks, psychic obstacles that they had to overcome in their meditation. And every time there was, you know, heroic effort, they would sit through it and they would burn up and they would have these horrific visions and, and sure enough, they would break through that there'll be some transformation Perhaps there were stories he didn't tell us about people who didn't work. But he liked telling us situations where it worked.

So it's interesting to look at an issue like capital punishment as a Buddhist practitioner, because what it what it entails, I think is certainly looking at our own motivation in our relationship to it. It also entails looking at what are all the various karmic consequences, what are all the various connections to such an event, the interdependent world of such an event, because it's very easy to have a very narrow opinion, a solitary opinion, to be filled with anger, for example, if one person and then say, well, this, you know, This person needs to somehow be punished for that action. And it's all about revenge, and to be blinded by the desire for revenge or punishment, and not see the tremendous field of interconnected cause and effect that that one action might have. For example, to what degree does he execution United States government sector sanctioned executions, support a culture of violence the United States? does it support the very culture out of which commits we make they came, they can make they came out of a culture of guns and violence, the militia movement? and to what degree is that whatever violent aspect there is American culture? Do I agree that supported kind of psychically

by the kind of influence that public executions have? You know, maybe some, some people don't want to think about that or they think obviously, there's none Whatever. But the Buddhist tendency is to think what are the wider implications of what's going on with like wider nexus of connections and going on, and not naked, just a single, solitary item issue, you know, single issue, just revenge or just punishment, or just one thing or another. I read today, in a Time magazine article, they had an article about evil. And since I was going to give, I was thinking about this today for a talk, I read the article in evil. And the biggest surprise in reading this article for me, was the claim. It was in Time magazine said

that Adolf Hitler's book, Mein Kampf

was, too, apparently, to a large degree, was plagiarized from a book written by Henry Ford, who was an anti semitic anti semitism, who wrote this apparently anti semitic track there probably was translate into Germany, you're into German. And so you can't blame Henry Ford for what Hitler did in Germany. But to what degree was, is there a wider kind of culture a wider mill? Yeah, that made it a lot easier for Hitler to kind of rise to power and do what he had to do. And to what degree did what happened was happening in America also influence eventually what happened in Germany. So the tendency in Buddhism is to look at these wider connections. And now to kind of look at something it's just only and it's only it's, you know, narrow, very narrow, one issue kind of point of view.

So

So what is the influence? What's the effect that capital punishment has on the wider society, and that's one of the big debates in our society and different people fall on different sides of that. Some people are quite convinced that it works very well as a deterrent. And some people feel that it doesn't work. As it turns it on, both sides kind of mash together all kinds of data. And we you know, and there's conflicting data and we don't know quite who to believe.

But

you know, which side you know, can we arbitrate which data we're going to believe? Or at some point do we believe our hearts? So then the question is, what is our personal relationship to an issue like capital punishment? How do we relate to it? Is it out of sight, out of mind kind of thing? Or is it only really relevant in a way that you feel like you can make a difference when it's time to have an election on such issue? And so you then you vote yes or no for capital punishment. But is there a relationship to capital punishment one of you know, is it primarily influenced by your person's anger

or by their fear or by almost kind of a pornographic kind of

voyeurism because it's excitement you know, grit, you know? kind of did a lot of juice for some people to kind of participate or watch or know about an execution. And it wasn't so long ago in this country that there were public executions really public. I think the last one was in 1936. It was a basically public hanging anybody could come to. And they used to be, you know, in England in places that they're very public and children would be there and all kinds of people would be there to watch and ancient Rome, you know, Colosseum in Rome and glad that people have come to watch the gladiators killed themselves. There is an element of kind of, I don't know what to call exactly the kind of excitement that people get and, and so so is the person relationship, one of kind of Glee, excitement that something like this is happening. What's the person relationship individuals have to this kind of topic.

So that's

I have a lot of more I can say on this topic. But the danger if I say too much, is that I slide too much into my opinion, which maybe is already obvious. And so I think rather than just kind of going on with things I could talk about, I thought we can have some discussion as a group about this topic. See what your thoughts are and what your reflections had been on this topic, and maybe your questions you might have. Yes. I have a question.

Briefly with someone at work, I have kind of a black and white view, which is, you know, to write something

wrong, and it's

just not a good idea to kill other people. And this person said to me, and I

said, Well, you know, what, if you have knowledge as somebody that this person plans to kill other people, you know, to stay alive and I don't

You know, so if you've been in Oklahoma City just before, commences at this job, and you had a chance to kill him before he killed hundred 68 people, should you?

Yeah, or thinking about onboarding? Well, I mean, you know, there wasn't much talk about this 999 people who died and, you know.

So it's

a bit confusing for me, I don't believe in killing people. But what about our kills or maybe we'll be killed.

So this has been a big debate in the history of Buddhism disparity issue, is there times when it's justified to kill someone. And the only time it seems to be justified is just use this issue here. If you know that you're going to prevent a lot of other people from being killed. And so different Buddhists will argue this back and forth. There's different opinions within Buddhism on this topic.

One very traditional view, especially in Theravada Buddhism, which tends to be much more literal and legalistic overall It's a generalization is no way that that it's so a no way that you sacrifice your own karma because the karma so bad on you even if it's for a good cause you're creating such bad karma for yourself that no one in the right mind would do something like that because you might you might save the life of 168 people, but you're gonna spend, you might spend you know 168 billion years burning in hell. The hell in Buddhism is always temporary. There's after 168 billion years you you get out and or and other people feel that other people have decided that the set that that is that it's okay that it's not okay Exactly. I don't think anybody's Buddha said it's okay Could it be okay? But some Buddhists have come to the decision that they know that's gonna, that's a terrible thing to do. They know they're going to create very bad karma for themselves and doing it. But out of their compassion for all the people who are going to be potentially killed, they're willing to sacrifice their own Well, the well being. So that so that so the person who you know who interferes catches the murder beforehand and kills the murder, the mass murder. That person is willingly taking on 168 billion years in hell. So 168 people in this life won't die. And that's the way it's kind of so it's a kind of act of compassion and sacrifice of oneself in order to do that.

So that's the extent that I know that

and so you find people making that decision history of Buddhism, you found various times, even in the modern in the modern world. You find some monastics I think in black and brown My mother was a monk who either killed or tried to kill assassinate one of the leaders of Burma in the last 60 years and in Sri Lanka, there was something like that and you find various times in Buddhist monastics involved in murder. And they they realize they're taking on bad karma, but they feel like this person has to be stopped. But that's very hard decision to know. It's kind of like playing God. Yeah.

Right. Yes. Right.

Yes, absolutely. But

I clearly agree, but, and then, so So, but there was there was at least one German moment Deliver World War Two, who is the inner circles of Hitler and knew what was going on. He planted a suitcase with bomb underneath the table where Hitler was, and, and then bumped it didn't, didn't do what it spits it out to do. And, and he, you know, he saw with it there was doing he saw, I mean, it wasn't like potentially he was like ongoing event. So it's still kind of chilling, but but, you know, if you kind of, sometimes we take these kind of ethical issues, what people like to do is to take the most extreme

example, as what about an extreme example? And the question is, is it fair to take the most extreme example, and then justify and then because of the extreme example, justify, you know, in all other circumstances and and, and Timothy McVeigh, for some people is a really extreme case. so extreme that even a lot of people in United States who are against the death penalty are staying pretty quiet this time. Because they kind of think, well, this guy, you know, I'm against, I'm against it, but I can't quite like I feel like myself actually, you know, so I was invited to the schedule I can't go tomorrow but I find my you know if it almost if it had been execution almost anyone else

I would have gone with more

motivation but you know the motivation I find myself elevation a little bit wave wavering because of this particular one. I mean, I'm still very clear my opinion but I find myself I find it odd that I have little different feeling about it here. And, and that's one of the reasons why I think this particular time or this execution is very powerful for us as a country's psyche. Because it is, even though we shouldn't take the exception is kind of his place to generalize. Sometimes the exception exception kind of opens up the heart to kind of look at the whole thing a new breaks us out of our complacency.

I'm sorry if I talk too much after

I think there's a distinction that needs to be made between

forgiveness and the view of the death. That is,

in no way obliged to condone this

person if we're opposed to kill, right.

And the alternative is not to let him out to go kill someone else.

Sometimes when you set up an extreme case like that,

you're introducing other

other epochs

in addition to the one that that you're trying to deal with, in extreme cases, almost always do that.

So, so while I can appreciate the issue,

Timothy would say himself is not a sympathetic character.

It doesn't change the issue for me that we shouldn't

and there was a very interesting Article on the subject in the Sunday magazine is in new york times this week. And there was a man whose wife was killed,

who is very, very, very pro.

And he's now come to the decision that he does not think.

And his reason is that by focusing on it so much he's come to realize that he did not want to become like, nice. Adam.

couple months before the election, there was actually an interesting article in The New York Times

about the people who are

killing

any other state problems.

It just seemed to me to kind of point out

the ramifications of being involved.

Another thing which is always perplexes me

a little bit no calculus of suffering and karma I wonder if there it is.

But it seems

to me like our present

I have never been in a prison impression This is

a very hellish place with a lot of violence. A lot of

comments

Somehow it seems to me like

basically

will, so forth might be

institutionalized

for a larger percentage of our population. Yeah. JOHN,

talking about karma.

We kind of forget that war.

Just the justification

and what kind of collective karma

in our country

are selling of weapons to other countries so they can carry on wars. And I think this is

very much a part of

specifying.

One of the interesting questions, I think is, to what degree is there? Is it completely complacent, complete complicity by citizens of a country to what degree do you do Americans feel like Well, that's how you know, that's happening. Washington DC, those people who are doing it, and to what degree do we feel like we're all part of it together? The things the choices the government makes, and nor what degree of responsibility do we feel we have, and I suspect that the that the low low turnout voter turnout in this country reflects a feeling that many people have that they don't feel responsible. Yes. Yeah.

I think as far as the role,

basically positive and negative,

say assassinate the same, becoming more and more people. I think it's only when you are feeling that they might be taken.

I think that's just conjecture, we don't really know.

Think unless someone has some definite proof for that. I think it would be a positive. And as far as the base situations, this is some paradoxes here because

we're all familiar with the near death experience going down the tunnel and all that

throwing away

So it would be a kind thing. In that sense, I'm assuming a

documentary movie.

By the time you got through and everything was describing, I was looking forward to dying.

Anybody Oh, if I if I could just see if I can jump in. You said the first thing was a conjecture about karma. It's also conjecture. What's that? What's gonna happen to each of us when we die? Even though there might be some examples, anecdotes about wonderful near death experiences. It's just conjecture what's gonna happen to anyone.

My understanding is

different people from all over the world diversity pretty much

Anyway, the third point I want to make was

that a lot of clergy

are against the death penalty, because poor

people will counsel people with cancer terminal cancer patients and talk about, you know, there's no big problem and dying and

so forth. So there's

consistency there. I really want to question

one of the things that come,

I don't know very much about was how the people in Cambodia are dealing with the leaders of the Khmer Rouge that have recently

been caught. Run. I understand the United States government has been putting pressure on that government to

inflect greater punishment on those leaders that have been caught for doing

horrendous killing. I mean, you know, this is not 168 people, it's millions.

Is there anything about

bad pitches? I really don't know much about the situation. Yeah.

We're gonna go appoint that experience as a good teacher. And I've had the fortunate and unfortunate experiences firsthand with this whole subject. 10 years ago, I have three family members.

One of the murders happens to be my brother.

And so

you can kind of imagine sense of the kind of interesting dynamic.

For me, this has been a issue with being somewhat new to Buddhism, the last half or so. It's like I really struggled with because on one hand, I have, like, anger because I've really gotten past that in 10 years, but my brother is still in prison,

doing life without parole, because I requested enough

and it was something I really really struggled with. And whenever this issue comes up and it comes up about twice a year somebody gets executed or something like that. I really can see both sides of the fence. I mean, if I'm sitting on the fence, I can clearly see both sides. And I love it. It makes me angry when somebody

makes statements on either side, that has not gone through the experience. Because it's really if you sit on one side, you say, I have recovered members who are very nice. I mean, in my job, I see that

but I also like it. And it's something that when people that have been through war I've seen it's really something that will never leave me but I also had the prospect of having my brother summarily murdered by potentially the government.

And so

I think that's a really difficult thing. If you have not gone through to see him clearly. Of course. I wouldn't wish anybody had to go through? That?

It is a subject that requires really deep thought. And

we would have points out to me a little bit is that the tendency for us to use anecdotes to justify our position. And so you find people on both sides kind of saying they found relief and that's the execution, never their family was the killer, the family was killed, and other people who say, you know, they didn't find relief and they wish it didn't happen, or they kind of forgive and it's really hard to put ourselves in the shoes and to use the anecdote, an anecdote is, you know, as a generalization is you know, disrespectful, I think and so, so

So,

Neither one who hasn't seen be the one to cast the first stone

kind of thing. But we still we have to vote. Those of us who those of us who don't. Those of us who don't have that experience, still have to make a decision.

Yes. Mita

is not really

about essential

transformation of art. I was very young, I was about four

under medical emergency

and she was grooming her younger son to be the next prime minister in a democracy.

And this younger person was actually

quite brutal and we're going to have People force studies

in order to control population.

So there was a lot of fear in the society

when he actually came into power, because he didn't think that any at all.

My family was

discussion of office issue in

office events. And then I remember when

we were studying and the hermit, he

used to love to fly.

And my first feeling was,

oh my god, you know this. You don't have to worry about this person anymore. And I said, my father and I said, didn't you

And my father was

a political activist.

We are looking at it and I was just absolutely delighted that the country was

this person.

Also my life

is such as this one

You're trying to take an action.

This last one

has some information

for us about the Cambodian situation.

I happen to have a houseguest now, who is a Cambodian man who is

a human rights organization.

The United Nations.

We just got back from

studying about human rights ads

at Columbia and I looked at grant proposal This is trying to get

where he is hoping to do

rehabilitation, not only of victims of torture and brutality but potations of the perpetrators of marriage, who are now allied with the government and still have the same mindset of brutality

and are not Cambodian constitution

teach them

different ways of seeing

didn't want to come tonight because he doesn't like meditating

a little bit.

But I think it's all these these kind of questions are

fundamentally from a Buddhist point of view. Fundamentally very personal questions. And the personal aspect is, is incense more important than the public. Though the public's a very important aspect also, with respect to his point of view is to really go deeply into ourselves into our hearts and, and really see what motivates us and, and to clarify that to purify it and see if the best and purest motivations can be the source of our actions.

The

and to never

leave anyone out of our hearts.

So thank you for this evening. And if any of you would like to be joined, be part of this little group called the mid Peninsula, mid Peninsula, people of faith against death penalty. There's information about that that can be had

Thank you all. Good night.