

# 2003-06-23: Flavors of the Dharma

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## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So I kind of moved to say that coming down here today, I felt really happy. But coming down here, I wouldn't be happy with the idea of somehow discussing a Dharma together with everyone. And I think it's a really beautiful thing to discuss the Dharma. But first, I have some announcements to make. This Wednesday. There's a half day sitting from 930 to 1215. And they're lovely half day sittings. And I'm available for about six interviews. If 15 minute interviews, people come and beginning sign up. And then we have a team program this Friday from 730 to 930. And then I'm going to not going to be here for the next two, Monday's next Monday, Alan Senaki is going to come. He was the director of the Buddhist peace fellowship for many years and now is kind of Still very central to that organization. And it's also a very senior Zen priest, the Berkeley Zen center. Very interesting. Then, in the following Monday, Arjun Syndra is going to be here. Now, John Syndra is a, she's been she was here last year for about a week or 10 days. And she is a senior, one of the most senior nuns in the monastic community of Jensen meadow, and England. And she's a French woman who was ordained in England, in the Thai forest tradition. A French English Thai Buddhist. That's great. And here in living in America, and these days, and she's a wonderful woman. She embodies the spirit of that tradition very well, the way she presents the Dharma and how she And it's quite a lovely person to spend time with. And she's kind of going to be our resident teacher for the kind of the week she's here. And she's going to do a whole bunch of activities more than during the week, she's here more than we usually do. And including a three day non residential retreat. But I think you can just drop in just probably schedule, just come and join as you wish. And there's this kind of flyer on the table out there, I believe, with 10 of her schedule, things she's doing here, while she's here. One of the things she's doing is July 1 Tuesday evening, a traditional puja it's called in Sanskrit and Pali worship service, that with chanting and meditation, probably some bowing. And there's a long tradition in Buddhism of including a lot more as integrally part of Buddhist Buddhist practice, than just meditation, and the bowing and the chanting and all that is often considered quite integral to it all and we don't do much of that here in our trading. At least I haven't. And so he or she brings this flavor in if you want to explore a different side of the Dharma, how it's expressed. That's the way to get it. And that's a little bit has to do with my theme

of what I would like to raise for some discussion today is all the different flavors. Of all the different ways in which the Dharma Buddhism Buddhist practice gets expressed. And all different ways that it manifests in different people's lives and different countries and different cultures and different groups, you know, all the different ways. And a little bit inspired by this because we've had a series of meetings, we had to start meeting with architect on Sunday, and all I said is what should this building be like? You know, you know, these are all kind of kind of just very, very summarized very basic, or it kind of Route kind of issues. You know, what is the building look like? What's the space like what's sacred space look like? And Do we make it look into what we want? Not most people will come in here and probably recognize that this was a church once and because it has that, you know, and what would a Buddhist flavor be or Buddhist flavor be in America? And we make it like a Thai temple or Burmese temple flavor or to make Japanese or Tibetan, or Indian or, you know, or do we make it American? And what's American? Do we make admission style kind of Spanish style? And it seems like it seems like it makes sense or do we you know, what is it? And in considering this issue, I'm very aware that one of the central junctures of Buddhist practice

is the meeting of the Dharma, the Dharma meaning both the practice the practice principles, The practice the practices, and the teachings, the meaning of the Dharma, and yourself and you who you are as an individual. And that's a very special place that meeting place of you as an individual and the Dharma. And it can't be replicated. It's very unique and very nice to be respected. Very much. I like the fact that the word respect in English, you know, the root root meaning of it, I guess, in Latin, which means to look again, to spec respect, that means to look again. And that speaks very well for what we pass in our practice is clear seeing that we're trying to develop, build, you look carefully, look, again, what's really going on here. And what happens in that interface between you and the Dharma. And you know, we think about all the people here and there's so many different streams of backgrounds that come into this room here. And each of us very unique, you know, you go back to, you know, your ancestor And I think probably all of you probably, my guess your ancestors didn't, you know, came to this continent sometime in the last in the last five centuries

I came to this continent in this generation, I'm an immigrant to this country and, and experienced some other what it means to be an immigrant, not much but a little bit being an outsider and getting in and being ridiculous ridiculous. We're not being able to speak properly and you know the stream of our cultural backgrounds or family background We all carry it, it carried with us all these things I'm thinking of. I recently went back to where I was born and went back to Norway where I'm from. And with my five year old son, it was kind of special to kind of show him you know, where we came from, and, you know, the country and we actually went back to the farm, where I never seen my father's never seen my grandfather's never seen, but the farm where my grandfather's grandfather came from, you actually come to a little sign on the road that says Fronsdaal one kilometer that way. So it's like, you know, the place our name comes from. So it was kind of nice, right? And it was very, it was kind of a nice, fun time to with him. And I realized, you know how he's different than me, because that's only half of him. And the other half of him. How are we going to introduce him to that other half there's another side of the family is mother side of the family. Dutch Jews. We take into Bergen Belsen where

his grandparents were. And what age do we tell him that? We take him back to Amsterdam and say, Well, this is where they lived. You know, what age do we tell him about that side of his background. So he carries that with him. That's something that's, you know, still a bit different than what I carry with me. And so when I went to Nepal, many years ago, 20 years ago, I went to a temple called sky and blue temple. And it's a Buddhist temple in Kathmandu. And I came at a time of a Buddhist festival. And I was coming I was kind of walking around and I came to this little corner of it. At the temple, and there's kind of like a platform built into the temple wall or something and there was these musician musicians rocking out with, you know, with sitar and Tabligh playing this, you know, what I recognized as being a Hindu devotional music, that style and if you know this kind of style, very lively, very devotional and you know, they were like really wailing away at the drums and the sitar, you know, and they were singing Buddha hymns. Got cha me damansara nam got which is what you know me I take refuge in the Buddha I take refuge in the Dharma, I think. And I'm aware of the Japanese tradition where you chant very kind of plainly straightforward, you know, you don't put a lot of emotion into it. I'm aware of the Thai tradition. We're also you don't do a lot of emotions kind of a kind of dignified, you know. You know, it's works very well for certain Protestant types. And, but these guys were rocking out. And my first thought was, oh, that's Buddhism in influenced by Indian culture, kind of to kind of dismiss it. You know, the next thought was, oh wait a minute, the Buddha was in

and, and then I've gone I've studied a little bit, you know, the history of Buddhism and stuff. And there's this ancient thing called freezes ancient sculptures that just show kind of pictures there for over 2000 years ago, Buddhist holy sites in India, Sanchez and Sarna and different places and they have all these pictures of, of what Buddhist life Least idealize from Buddhist life was like, at these different sacred holy sites as stupid as the temples, monasteries. And from the evidence of these pictures, it was really lively. There was musicians rocking out to the same musical instruments as they were in Nepal, you know, 2000 years later, they were dancing, and apparently wildly because one of my favorite little depictions of this guy in the middle of these musicians, he's, you can tell he's dancing I Think You Can Dance him because looks like you swirling around very fast. Because back then the guys wore skirts. And something like that toe goes aren't what and, and so his his skirt is thrown out to one side, like this, so you see his naked butt. And I think that only makes sense. You know, if you're spinning around, you know. And then there's this guy up in this tree with his hands and his two fingers and four fingers in his mouth. You know, usually you do that when you're whistling really loudly and this is really Is Impressionism, a really lively devotional. And so this little of what I saw in India in Nepal wasn't maybe not an aberration was actually the expression of how Buddhism was celebrated in India for many centuries. There's other evidence, you know, the ancient India that Buddhism was quite lively lot of music and celebrations and a different flavor than what you get What I got in Japan or what I got in Thailand or Burma a different flavor than what I got in American American Buddhist circles I was in. I like to think of the Dharma as being like water. And water can take the shape of any container it goes into freely, and it goes into many different containers. Depending on the need, depending on what's available, depending on what's going on, depending how things are adult adapted, what's necessary different cultures, cultural settings. And what is it for us Here in America to adapt or invite or interact with that interface between ourselves and Buddhism, what happens here? The oldest form of

Buddhism in America is a Japanese Puroland tradition that came to America, I think somewhere around 1880 maybe. And, and they had huge issues of being Japanese, Japanese Americans of assimilating or fitting in or figuring out how to be Buddhists in this country. And because there was a lot of discrimination against them, I suppose. Where they try to do with assimilate the best they can. And so they created the Buddhist churches of America. Use the word church. And in fact, they started, something was never existed in Japan. They started Sunday worship Sunday services. They got the Oregon's they got pews. They got Sunday school for their kids. And they adopted all these things that they saw around them from Christian churches. And you know, they didn't lose their Buddhist roots, but they use the forms around them as a way of expressing their Buddhism. And then the generation that kind of that I was involved in, in 19th, you know, coming out of the 60s, and the counterculture was very much kind of in reaction against much of the status quo, kind of conventions of our Western and Western society, Western culture. And lastly, we want to do is be known as a church, you know, that was the last word we want to associate who are Buddhists and Buddhism, that church, you know, and so it's a whole different flavor. That generation of kind of mostly white Buddhists kind of were involved in. They're kind of bringing Buddhism back to this country here. Buddhism Dharma is like water. And sometimes people bring the containers with them. So for example, some groups, Asian groups, South Asian teachers have brought the whole age or if their particular Asian cultural tradition with them here to this country. And so you go into that temple, you feel like you're in Japan, you feel like you're in Burma or something, the this Burmese food or Japanese food or all these things,

and other groups of teachers have decided to take try to get rid of as many of the containers as they can, and bring just the water. And, in our tradition, the insight meditation tradition was more of that more that style with the teachers intentionally jack kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, pared away, stripped away as much of the containers as they could to get down to the simplicity of the water. And the purpose of doing that was to make the water as accessible to as many people as possible. They didn't weren't even sure they want to have a Buddha figure. Because even a Buddha figure is a key part of the container parts not part of the water. And people be turned off by seeing a Buddha. And so they want us to make the practices accessible to a wide range of people as possible. But then what's happened in the 30 years that this insight meditation tradition has been here in this country, it is slowly grown. And we have now a center here other places are getting centers and, and we're kind of like beginning to kind of put different elements into it. We're putting containers into it in around the water. And, and sometimes we don't even know we're doing containers we come in, we think, oh, but it has always been this way, hasn't it? You know, this is pure Buddhism in its pristine purity. You know, the fact that there are Sunday potlucks or whatever. And, or particular ways of teaching people the emphasis particular things that are talked about. Some teachers will talk a lot about that. rebirth and we'll never talk about it. Some teachers will talk a lot about supernatural realms, and some teachers will never talk about it. Some teacher talks mostly about you know, more psychological or psychological strategy, how they talk about the Dharma. other teachers will never talk against a meadow, who's a Californian Thai forest tradition monk teaching in England. It's it's all mixed up. He, he said once, and he teaches in Thailand, which is a he's a highly revered teacher in Thailand. It's very different when he teaches in the West. In the West, he feels like he has to teach in a much more

cycle and much more psychological note. And he would never do that in Thailand. When people scratch their heads and wonder what's what's he talking about? And so, you know, the what we what we talked about, you know, it's very much tailored to what interests us What's our needs are particular people or what you know, all kinds of things. But each individual person is different. And it's that personal interface between yourself and the Dharma, which is really where the really juices where the real emphasis of practice where the transformation can happen. And sometimes we lose sight of that because perhaps the Dharma center, or the teachings or their place has a particular flavor that isn't particularly our flavor. And so how, where do I fit in here? Or what's going on with me? What do I want? what's what's right for me? And, and then, but if you make it too much like yourself,

if it becomes just like yourself, then what's the point? You know, then you're not gonna be helped, you know, but, you know, where's the interface? Where's that balance? Where's attention? What's going on there? How do we respect that meeting place? champion. Trungpa, who was a famous teacher who came, Tibetan teacher came to this country. After living in America for a while, he decided that what was needed here was all his disciples are, are some of them at least in order to really be proper Buddhists to show respect for Buddhism respect for the practice, they had to wear suits and ties, least the men did. The women had to wear the equivalent, and suddenly you had all these hippies, you know, ex hippies, you know, cutting your hair and putting on, you know, these nice suits and walking around, you know, and that was their way of doing it. There was one person that came to Vipassana retreat and said, Oh, this is great. comes to my cut my community. We got to sing. You know, magic going to spirit rock and singing. But they do. James Jasper has placed a guitar sometimes. And so now I've set the stage. Now I've set the I hope, been provocative and brought something up. Because this to Dharma talk today requires something from hopefully each of you, for each of you doesn't have to be on the spot. There's a way out. That's short of walking out the door. And that is, what I like to ask of you all, is to form little groups of five or six people, I think it's best if we can do five so we can kind of keep to everybody has a chance to speak. If you don't want to speak, it's okay. Part of what I want partly what I want from this is a chance for you to listen to other people and learn from other people how you know, what their reflection is on this topic. But it'd be great if you speak to because no one's spoken. And we don't feel like you have to. And what I like to you to reflect on is and you might not know much about Buddhism, this might be your first night Hear, maybe you don't want to talk, then you just kind of listen to what people have to say. Or maybe you know a little bit or you can imagine, it's really fine to say whatever you'd like to say. And what I'd like you to talk about, or think reflect on, is given who you are, as a unique individual with your own background, cultural, ethnic, everything. What are the expressions of Dharma practice that would be most meaningful for you? What would speak to you what would be? What were the forms that are helpful for you and why is it helpful? What is it speaking to for your background? Some people ritual is really important that it's so ritual can be very profound and goes very deeply into person's psyche. It's very transformative. And it's the ritual coming together with a community that's created by having ritual and the repetition of it and having ritual go deep and the rhythm of It's very powerful and significant. And is what Sergio is going to offer here when the traditional way a little bit. For some people, you know, it's, you know, it's all kinds of things people silence, that's what they bought value the most. Some, you know, it's, you get the point I'm just

trying to say. And the spirit of this is the word respect to see to see more deeply see oneself. So hopefully your game and what we'll do is an act to ask each of each of the groups each of the groups of five or so that you talk, try to talk a little bit quietly, be sure you hear yourself hear each other, but be aware there's a lot of different groups talking at once here. So we don't have sound like a cocktail party. And find out to be very careful as a group as individuals, that everybody in your group gets a chance to speak. And, and what I like to ask each group to do is talk is to talk for about 450 10 minutes and then 15 minutes, I'm going to ring a bell. And then we'll regather we'll have a little bit further discussion based on on those. Any questions. So please keep keep an eye on the time so everyone has a chance to speak who wants to speak. And if it feels like the energy is kind of feeling complete, I'll bring the bell a bit earlier but probably 15 minutes is a good amount of time to talk. Okay, thank you COVID

One of the cultural containers of Buddhism is that when the bell rings, you stop talking.

So that was lovely to sit and just be kind of witnessing the discussions. I thought that we would take about a minute or so close your eyes if you'd like and sit and be quiet.

So what was it like for some of you to listen to your companions in your circle, about what they had to say about that interface between themselves, the Dharma kind of expressions that are meaningful for them will come up in your discussion like to share a little bit. The most

amazing thing about the five people that I sat with is the incredible spectrum of people. And it is amazing to me It struck me in listening to them that that it is that the people who come and sit here and partake and donor are an incredible perspective.

Because there was someone who had been counting on me three months and sitting for three months and then there was maybe

as long as I can remember now, and there was a Catholic nine. And someone from the Unity Church it was it just the Saturday the amazing. So whatever container we have, we have that

I was actually struck by the diversity of commonality and their experiences and it seemed like a number of us came from very religious backgrounds. And so which was which was very new to us. But because as we were talking about like the spirit block, distill things to make it very accessible, it seemed to me like that flexibility is very

parody of the teachings was



very appealing to a lot of us that we really could apply without just feeling like we were doing something else. So that was really kind of nice. And then a lot of us talked about that chanting and how to work with it.

But it was something that we were becoming, especially with the refugee class people

talking about how that

it seemed like it was a next step, perhaps because it was a way to relate to the teachings that weren't. So some people are much more

energetic in nature and

for myself as well, I do channel that into people.

And I've also found that it's sort of a nice complement to the psychological aspects of the teachings.

Thank you.

Like the fluid nature of the past

Teaching so that we can we can take from it. What What is useful to us rather than being taught to a PC we can, we can listen and try it and then see what parts of it are meaningful for us.

Thank you.

It was interesting that the

I was gonna say intention, but there wasn't really an intention but the interplay between ritual and form and, and an openness a microphone. A lot of people have experience with Zen and chanting in the forms is much more strict, much more form. And there was a there was a lot of pull in that direction, which is not appropriate because we're all here. But it's it's interesting.

The cold staring up for the other

floor

I heard jack kornfield one say that was, oh no. We do have a form in this Vipassana circles. The form is simplicity and no form. And, and it's much more difficult this way. Yes.

The sincerity that people bring to practice. This isn't a place that people come to this kind of network of social

sincerity, practice and also a desire both to challenge the challenge.

It's kind of an easy,

convenient,

comfortable spirit

A lot of people in my group

something that I've

just mentioned in the group is that what I loved love about this group.

presentation in general is the sense of humor is if you record our meetings is how many times people are split up and just laugh if I seem like a different sort of meeting. And

as in Germany who came here, three weeks ago, I had the fortune to be here.

And he's even further

your rescue and

it seems right in some very extreme sense.

That the more we advance on the on the path, the more light and easy You know, it's so fun. It's important to keep it fun and easy and automatic and not a surprise. And I know that

if you seek a group in which there is no love for get out of it

was anybody surprised by what they said themselves?

Anybody

already you all kind of the old hat for you reflected this before and yes, I was surprised



that I do get something out of champion.

One of the things that attracted me to here in the first place was lack of ritual.

And I find it in some circumstances, very steadying, very supportive.

Speaking of forms, forming up into groups of five or six is itself a form and I found it surprisingly pleasant to listen to other people.

Their impressions and ideas. Thank you great. surprised that

I do sensory experimentation in the Catholic Church and I feel that Buddhist meditation is so similar. Like so close that.

It is surprising because there's another similarity. Yes, definitely. Thank you. Yes.

I was excited. People

have to back out of the settlement. Come here. Value

holding space

support.

But there we go other places to get the auditory kinesthetic chanting. You don't have to

go in the alley and do it.

Yes. I

should have said the reason I came in was for the discipline

and listening to everyone. I am somewhat shy and I have to accept people that I have seen it all I know someplace

Yeah, no, thank you. That was lovely. And I hope it was, was meaningful for all of you. I think it's very important for us periodically to have this kind of way of connecting and talking at this level, it's sometimes rare. So many people don't have the chance in their life to have kind of conversation, these

kind of topics with other people. And so I hope was nice and useful. I hope that all of you realize that. That Buddhism in the West is probably everywhere, but certainly here it's obviously here. So in the West, that it's, it's very much being created as we do it. It's as we live it, and that each of you are in your involvement is helping to create it and you put you'd wait what you bring is what's unique to yourself and your background, and needs and interests and you're suffering and, and hopefully that you'll find in Buddhism a place with where you feel comfortable and feel met for who you are, and,

and

but not too comfortable.

So

if it's just a source of comfort, then it's not going to have a transformative value. So, thank you very much and I'll be back in a few weeks.