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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

I would like today to talk about compassion. To explore the topic a little bit with you all. It's been on my mind a fair amount lately. Partly because I'm getting ready to make a small presentation on compassion in a few weeks. But also it's just for various other reasons been in my mind. And I think most of you know that compassion is a very important quality of Buddhist practice very important quality of gets evoked through Buddhist practice. And sometimes it's said in Buddhism, the two wings of Buddhism are wisdom and compassion. I've been thinking a lot about wisdom, compassion in relationship to service, offering ourselves and try to help other people in some way or other, to be of service for others. And As my understanding the call for service in Buddhism comes from the inner movement of compassion, or empathy. And that the, there is no external external authority in Buddhism that says, Thou shalt be of service, that you know, you have to do this, that you have to kind of go to Cambodia and work with the, you know, AIDS patients or whatever you might want to do. There's no one that's judging you saying, This is what you should do, or you should align your life this way. And, but rather, and there's no there's no kind of god that's telling you, you should do this. But rather, the call for service comes from the inner movement within us when it happens, that is based on compassion based on an empathic response to the suffering around us. And it's interesting Daniel golde men. In his book emotional intelligence makes a distinction between empathy and sympathy. He claims that the person who coined the word empathy and its modern psychological usage, distinguishes it from sympathy, where sympathy was a very general sense of very general kind of distant sense of concern or pity for the plight of others concern for the plight of others. Whereas empathy was more not just the abstract kind of more distance concerned, but rather a real sense of a feeling or understanding in some way. The suffering other people are going through and different people will have empathy in different ways.

I think some people it's more understanding to kind of the vehicle and some people some seemingly more vehicles through the heart perhaps or more through kind of emotional resonance that they seem to feel and then from empathy then comes can't come The motivation to try to want to alleviate that

suffering and others motivation, it would be good if this other people didn't suffer so much and want to help or do something for them. And so compassion Buddhism Karuna is not just empathy, but is this movement of the heart movement that wants to somehow alleviate the suffering of others and wants somehow to respond to it in some way. That is of service of aid of help. So the call for service in Buddhism is one that comes from inner authority and inner sense and inner movement. And different people will feel it in different ways. Different people will feel at different times in their lives, different different people, you know, feels different degrees. And there's no basis that I know of particularly to judge people as better or worse because of the degree of empathy interview of compassion they have. And it's a dangerous to judge because people's response to the world is very, very different to a wide range of different is when I studied with Robert Aiken rushy in Hawaii Zen master. I studied with him for two years. And he was one of the preeminent, engaged Buddhist teachers in America, especially at his time when he was a peak of his teaching career. And he helped found the Buddhist peace fellowship. And he would go off to places like Guatemala and be witness for peace kind of gold, follow along people who were threat, or threatened to be assassinated. And just be kind of a presence there. And often just having an American president would often protect their lives. And he wrote about engaged Buddhism and so there are people who came to Hawaii to study with him, because they themselves had a very strong interest in engaged Buddhism, politically engaged, socially engaged Buddhism. And so it was kind of like a wing of the meditation center that these social activist Buddhists. And then there are another wing of people who mostly were people who kind of happened to be living in Hawaii and got interested in Zen practice. And he was And teacher and they're very sincere and committed Zen students. And I think really good hearted people. But they had no motivation for social activism. And then there was this little tension then in the community between these two people. And attention came mostly from the people who were social activists who can help. You know, if you're going to be a real good Buddhist, you have to be socially active. How can you be Buddhist if you're not socially active? And they these poor people, you know, I'm poor, but these people who felt you know, that didn't feel motivated in the same social actors kind of way. felt kind of like well, gee, you know, I'm just doing this wonderful thing. I thought it was really important for me, and I'm living my life and I and why am I suddenly feeling so bad? To his credit, Robert Akin, you never felt a ripple of this kind of judgment or concern from Robert Akin. He seemed to embrace it hold everybody equally. And it wasn't any kind of feeling from him that you had to you know, express your Buddhism in any particular way. But still for those people who are called to do something called, you know, loosely service, in Buddhism, the call for it the authority for the call the motivation for it comes from compassion, this inner movement from within us primarily. Sometimes you can come from the outside, if service is taken on as a practice, in the sense that is I'm going to put myself in this kind of activity, because I can learn from it, it'll stir things up for me, it'll help me in my mindfulness practice or my, whatever practice I'm doing. And so it's done pragmatically, not so much to be of service because that in that environment, is helping your own practice. It's not necessarily from the same kind of inner motivation of compassion.

And where does that come from? Or where does compassion come from? Where does that call the movement for being of service or this empathic response want to do something for the suffering of

others where I've come from if you look at the early Buddhist discourses, teachings of the Buddha, my impression is that compassionate response to the world is just assumed, in the sense that it's never, there's never a rationale for it particularly. There's no you know, he doesn't explain why this is a good idea or why you should be this way. Just assume that this is some people are this way or this is the way things are just just an assumption about this. And if you look at the story of the Buddha's enlightenment, after he was enlightened, it said he spent some time just living in the bliss of his enlightenment. And then at some point, and he was disinclined to teach other people what he discovered, is inclined to help other people become liberated. And then the god Brahma, the great God in the Indian Pantheon, kind of like the Zeus of India. He divined that the Buddha didn't want to teach he was reluctant to teach. So he went to the Buddha and said to the Buddha, in shorthand you should teach. What he said was, please open the doors of the deathless, open the doors to liberation for people. And the Buddha, it's inside you kind of survey the world and realize that there were there were people in the world who had like little dust across their eyes. So you could easily wipe it away and they could see. And because there were people who had little dust in their eyes, that Oh, yeah, maybe I can teach. But then he made a very interesting statement. He said, The doors of the deathless are already opened. He was asked to open them and he said, No, it's already open. It's not up to him to open them. Maybe they're already here. It's already open right here in this room, you know, in your eyes right now. What would that mean? The doors of the deathless are over for you right now. And then he started and then he went off to teach and he spent the next 45 years or so teaching. And it said that his 45 years of ministry of teaching was an expression of great compassion. His motivation was expression manifestation of this compassion he felt for the world. And it's quite common in in traditional Buddhism, in particular, for Buddhists to be to be quite moved, and inspired, sometimes to the point of tears, of thinking about the compassionate activity of the Buddhist 45 years of stretching himself extending himself for the benefit of all beings. So what I wanted to point to here in the story is the use of the of the god Brahma to inspire to prompt the Buddha to go and teach. And now we can take this literally, we can do many ways of understanding this, but I'd like to suggest to take it a little bit more mythical here. Maybe metaphorically in there have been some some scholars, I don't know how much how good the scholarship is for this kind of theory. But there's some scholarship that says that in the ancient world, people do not understand very well, where their thoughts came from. These thoughts would still be there, and they can, and sometimes they attributed to some external voice. In the early Buddhist tradition, you find a lot of expressions of the expression of voice in the sky. Some voice in the sky told me something. And, and, you know, I've never heard any Buddhists try to explain what this is. But from the scholarly kind of theory, the idea is that, that people don't necessarily old days didn't know about thoughts and inspirations and creative ideas where they came from. And so their creativity was your own was kind of foreign. It was like your Muse that came in inspired you somehow it was kind of external, they wouldn't take credit for so Scott, this voice in the sky. So Brahma also here can be seen, the Buddha had this wonderful dialogue, this wonderful inspiration, this request to teach this movement to teach, to meet people in their suffering. But he didn't know where it came from, you know, we couldn't didn't I didn't have a clear way that this is where this is where it is, it's kind of assumed. It's just, it's just there. And, and so, you know, you have to attribute it somewhere. So attributed to something external to Brahma. So this probably doesn't hold

much biological water. At least I think most traditional Buddhist teachers will just kind of, you know, I think what he's talking about is ridiculous. But But what what, whether it's true or not, whether it's, you know, accurate interpretation or not of the story of Brahma and the Buddha.

This idea of compassion being assumed compassion arising from who knows where it's just there, for some people to there in particular ways and people's, they're in different ways. For some people, it's there for their family for some people. It's there for People in faraway and so people's there for animals or whatever, but it just kind of there. And, and the efforts try to rationalize why you should be compassionate, you know, to do probably all kinds of wonderful exercises for that. But, you know in Buddhism in early Buddhism, as I understand it just kind of there are it's not there to be assumed. And it expresses itself in such things and the teachings of the Buddha where he says a wise person should be concerned about what brings benefit to oneself, and what brings benefit to others. So you know, what brings benefit what helps alleviate suffering and improves lives of oneself and others. What I love about that expression of the of the, of the Pali Buddha's Buddha is that there isn't a sharp divide between self and other here. Person wise persons equally concerned with one's own vendor might benefit as with the benefit of someone else. Sometimes in Buddhism, you have a shot Divide, especially in western Buddhism is my my impression much more than an Asian Buddhism between self and other you almost like you have to sacrifice yourself in order to take care of other people. You know, if you take care of yourself that's selfish and taking care of others that's altruistic. And in order to be as a, you know, good human being, you're supposed to be altruistic. I think there's a thread of teaching in the West, about the importance of being altruistic, and the importance of not being selfish. That I think sometimes then overlaid on to Indian Buddhism, nutritional Buddhist teachings. And so the assumption is that Buddhism is also teaching people to be altruistic. And it's overlaid like in the jataka tales, where the stories where the Buddha sacrifices his body for hungry Tigris, oh is a great example of being altruistic. However, the traditional rationale for why the Buddha fed himself to hungry Tigris was not just because of compassion. It was because the Buddha was doing this for his own practice. He needed to, he needed to acquire a lot of merit, a lot of a lot of character building, in order to develop the kind of character that allows a person eventually in future lifetime to become a Buddha. So the Buddha was looking for opportunities to build this character, so that the Tigers was there Great. So in the West, we read the jataka tales to Oh, that's altruism. It is a kind of ultra altruism, but built into it also is this idea that he's doing it for this other purpose. In Indian India, as I understand it, scholars have talked about it. This divide between self and others, it's so sharp sometimes in the West doesn't exist. That what brings benefit to oneself in a spiritual way, would bring benefit to the world and bring benefit the world is partly being bring benefit to oneself. The two close together, you know, you don't sacrifice yourself in order to bring benefit to others. But you certainly motivated to bring benefit to others. But you know, to sacrifice yourself or squash or do violence to yourself or ignore how to take care of yourself is kind of a foreign ideas in my reading of Indian Buddhism. So wise person benefits oneself and benefits others is you know, his expression, I think of compassion in the Mahayana tradition, this idea of compassion being assumed or it just arises from who knows we're just there and then you live that way. It's there in some ways. It's not there use continue your life is expressed I believe in the idea that compassion arises from emptiness. One of the one of the key spiritual

experiences of the Mahayana, which exists in the early Buddhist tradition in tera, vaada tradition, but they don't just talk death. Don't don't don't use the same vocabulary to talk about it. But in their mind I talked about emptiness, experiencing the emptiness of all things experienced the emptiness. And somehow from the experience of emptiness, the emptiness of self, that emptiness and compassion are almost anonymous or in emptiness there's compassion. Compassion is the response of an empty mind and empty heart that somehow it just and then sometimes explained Well, when the boundaries of self and other fall away, when the hard boundaries hard separation of me hear you there, then the natural response is one of compassion. Do you find a lot of expression of a natural response is compassion when you from a place of emptiness?

And, you know, there's there's kind of reasoning about maybe how that works. But I like to just it's kind of, it's kind of doesn't really explain much at all. It just, you know, why should it be there? Why should compassion be there? when it went through emptiness? It just kind of it's just assumed it's part of the human makeup. This is what human beings can do sometimes. It arises from from within.

The story of the Buddha and Brahma is also has also some significance. Metaphorically here that, by extension, the Buddha, satin meditation, attained is liberation. And then, as he got ready to leave his bliss of liberation, I started getting ready to go out into the world again. That's where this movement of compassion, the question of compassion, exploring of it, the doubting of it, the hesitation to live, it came into play for the Buddha. It's a very dynamic place. This place we're leading meditation, really leaving the depth of our intimacy with spiritual life in some way. And, and then start entering into the world again or enter into relationship again. Go back to work or do something. And this is actually a very important area of Buddhist practices is that that movement back into the world, so called back into relationships back into our social world. And then in an interface, there's a lot of things that can happen. And to pay attention that interface to pay pay attention to what happens in your heart, pay attention to what happens in the feelings and responses you have to the people you encounter as you meet them, to pay attention to the motivations that might arise, to be in discussion with yourself about some of those motivations and explorations and doubts that might arise.

And then in that place, that's the place where compassion will begin to arise. The idea of emptiness, compassion arising out of emptiness, also has the idea that kind of that if you allow yourself to stay sensitive as you come out of meditation What will your heart do? What will what will happen in that concert other people, if you get busy and harried and run around and forget about your meditation, and or shut down and get preoccupied and various kinds of ways, it's very hard to feel compassion. It's very hard to feel this empathy. And some people choose not to feel compassion, or to feel empathy, because it's too painful. They'd rather not, or they're afraid of it, or they feel it's a burden, or they feel Oh, then all the shoulds of my life will come into play. I'm supposed to be a good person. I'm supposed to know all these inherited these ideas of how what it means to be a good person in life. And therefore, when I feel the suffering of others, I have to kind of, you know, click into action and be a certain way. I don't know if this is a good story to tell. It's probably not I mean, in relationship to this,

talk exactly when it comes to mind as I'm talking here. So I apologize. But I taught a retreat many years ago in Kansas City. And we did it at a, at a convent. We rented a wing of a convent, produce retreat. And so we came there for opening evening. And there were some of the nuns and economists were there to kind of welcome us and give us a little bit introduction to how to use the place and be helpful for us a little bit the opening evening, and people arriving for the retreat. And this woman arrived, you know, who the woman arrived and to do the retreat, seemed like a nice woman to me, you know, and she arrived and when she entered into the room came close to me to introduce herself to me, these two sisters who were standing next to me, kind of, you know, showing us what to do. They suddenly snapped into attention. Like they're in the military like, well He was clicked together. You know, I looked. And what I learned a bit later was that the woman who come into the retreat she had recently, not recently but some years ago left the convent and gone back into life and become a therapist and got interested in Buddhism and practice and all that. But, but when she was in the convent for she'd been there for 2530 years, she had been very superior to these, these two younger women, very superior, and the old conditioning was there. The surgeon is there. And so this idea of being a good person, you know, snapping to and you know, so there's various reasons why people might want to avoid, you know, trying to feel a socket, avoid feeling suffering in the world distract ourselves. We feel overwhelmed by it and burdened by it. But somehow to explore that interface and what happens to you as you encounter people to counter suffering of the world, and to see it as an extension of your practice to negotiate and engage in that part of, of life, I think is a very important part of practice. I would say that it's probably half of practice to do that.

I think this is a very powerful story. And maybe it isn't for everyone. But at least you know, for me, it comes from the stories of the Buddha's life, the vineya. Now to certain now, at that time, a certain monk was suffering from dysentery, and lay where he had fallen down in his own excrement. As the Buddha was walk walking about, he came to the lodging of that monk, when he saw that monk lying where he had fallen in his own excrements He went over to him and said, Brother, what ails you? I have dysentery. But is there anyone taking care of your brother? No. Why is it brother, that the monks do not take care of you? I am useless to the monks. Therefore the monks do not take care of me. Then the Buddha said to the Venerable Ananda, his attendant, go and Ananda and fetch water, we will wash the brother. When a Ananda had fetched water, the Buddha pointed out and the Venerable Ananda washed that brother all over, then the Buddha, taking him by the head and the Venerable Ananda taking him by the feet. Together, they laid him on a bed. Then the Buddha in his in this connection, and on this occasion, gathered the order of monks together in question him saying, monks, is there in such a lodging a brother who was sick calling the town And they said, Yes, there is. And what else that brother? That brother has dysentery. But brother, is there anyone taking care of him? No. Try to imagine, you know what they're feeling when the Buddha is asking him these questions, you know, it seems so Matter of fact, oh no. I didn't imagine that for a little bit. And the Buddha said, why not? Why do the monks not take care of them? They answer, that brother is useless to the order of monks. That is why the monks do not take care of is this for real? And so anyway, seemingly some monks can be kind of seemingly cold hearted or indifferent or clueless. So the Buddha says to them, You have no mother and no father to take care of you. If you will not take care

of each other. Who else will monks, those who would attend to me, let them attend to the sick. Those who would attend to me, let them attend to the sick. Part of the context for this last thing is that in Indian religions in general, some of them, they certainly in Buddhism, one of the ways to express your devotion and to practice devotional aspects of Buddhism, which is traditionally a very important part of the person's practice is to be of service to your guru to your teacher, or to make offerings, things like that, to take notes.

So, I'm sorry. We're not India and I'm in trouble now.

So, and it's a very powerful form of religious practice, in order to, you know, do offering especially someone like us, a Buddha, and people down through the ages, we'll still be offering flowers and all kinds of offerings to statue of the Buddha in the name of the Buddha, because it's such a powerful field of merit, that helps in the creation of practice and develops a person's practice and all that. And so, in the hierarchy of Buddhist practice, the person of highest merit is the Buddha himself. So, people often do them, you know, that's what they want to do their merit making is in relationship to a Buddha. And here the Buddha says, if you want to attend to me, attend to the sick, the Buddha is equating thing care of the sick to the power and significance of worshiping taking care of the guru? Isn't that great? Now there's a kind of a Jesus kind of thing similar isn't there? What is it? What is it the what is the quote from the Gospels? It's like that.

Is there another one that's also like that? That the one

He said something like distressing disguises since a little louder.

So, so attending the sick. So, the idea of compassion, compassionate service, again, that somehow taking care of the sick taking care of those who are distressed taking care of those who are suffering is, is a form of religious practice in this traditional style of practice where you take care of the guru and it kind of a devotional act in itself. If you want to practice devotion and Buddhism, one way is that one of the way of practicing devotion is you take care of those people who need help. It said that in Buddhism, the one of the functions of compassion is empathy is to see others as equal to yourself and their suffering. And this is a very important quality, because it's very easy in wanting to help take care of other people to see yourself as better than or, you know, you're up here as a helper and they're down there poor person needs your help. And people can get very resentful if they feel like you're kind of like, you know, up here and kind of helping them as if you know, you don't know, you know, but if you can share if they feel like you really, they're sharing if you share their suffering in some way or are you they feel If you're meeting them as an equal, it's a whole different level of care and response that will happen. And so it said in Buddhism, that part of the function of compassion is to help person meet the others as equal in this field of suffering and not, you know, different from I know, some people don't like the word help, but before the word be of service, because help implies you know, you give them a you're up there on dry land, you help them up, you know, you're helping them. But service is more, you

know, more like a servant. You're going to be a servant for people. That my Zen teacher, Mel Weitzman he was very clear, over and over again, that those people who became ordained as in priests, that they were becoming servants. And so rather than being you know, having a higher status in the community, they were actually supposed to be the kind of lowest status in the community. They're supposed to clean, clean the toilets and just offer whatever kind of, you know, simplest health and you'd be done. around if they're supposed to be servants rather than then leaders or whatever, to be of service rather than to be of help. Some people like it make that distinction. I gave a talk some years ago on compassion, and then someone in the audience came up to me and gave me this article that he'd written. In April last year, I witnessed a remarkable act of life saving. I was one of four men in a cancer Ward, recovering from surgery. My surgery was to remove melanoma cancer in my lymph system. My recovery was going well, and it was able for long periods of the day to observe quite comfortably the comings and goings in the ward. Opposite me was a man in his early 70s, who had his esophagus and stomach removed, and he was trying to cope with the trauma of this outcome and to learn to feed via tubes. We went into his body. His body was not reacting at all well to the diet or to the feeding process. And early one morning, he had failed to reach the washroom in time, while trying desperately to do so. He was shaking, humiliated and dejected. The nurse was just going off duty. The nurse just going off duty helped him back to bed and settled him down. But he looked awful. The new nurse came in, attended to each of us, but I could I could see her watching this patient at all times. She dispatched her time with each of the other three patients me included quickly and efficiently. then turned her attention almost undoubtedly, through her shift to the older men.

She brought in experts and did other things that I'm sure would technically and professionally correct. But it was the quality of the care the way she spent time with him. The compassion she brought to this cumulate humiliated, depressed and defeated human being that really caught my interest. She held his hand often spoke comfort, comfort, comfort, comfort ingly to him explaining what she was arranging and encouraging him to feel okay about how the day was unfolding. She was physically present with him frequently during the day. By the end of the shift. Near the end of the day, he was looking cheerful, communicating with us and moving with some degree of confidence and comfort. Later in the afternoon, I moved over to his bed and told him he was looking good. And then I thought he was very brave. He smiled and said he was feeling a lot better than he had in the morning. And then at the beginning of the day after his accident in the hallway, he felt his life slipping away. He felt useless, helpless, and held out, held out little hope of coping. He said I felt my last day had come. I believe this might well have been true. What was important for understanding what was important Understanding was what was going on was that he believed this feeling. And it had consequences for how we started the day. The compassion in the nursing process may have had as much to do or more with his recovery as any technical practice that was provided to him. Perhaps the compassion gave him a chance. He was still in the ward when I left. I don't know how he did subsequently, weeks later, I wrote a letter to the hospital administrators applauding the nurses work. Sometimes it said that that kind of compassionate care if someone else can save their lives, because that can be that important what we're doing, we're meeting someone else.

I wonder how often people shortchange or inhibit their compassion. Because they feel that the way that they can respond to the world is not going to have an effect. Or they feel they know can I do I can't really do anything.

And one of the things I think, we've learned over the years is that often unnecessary, unnecessary to do anything. But often, just sharing how you are in the presence of someone else. just sharing your own sense of empathy, your own sense of suffering, and just being present in an empathic way, is just enough in and of itself are very powerful in and of itself. And then if you know nothing else to do, just doing that can be very helpful.

So is compassion, something we can just assume? Maybe that's the wrong way of saying it. But once you know where to start passion comes from. It just seems to arise in contact with suffering. Though it said that people can develop their compassion and their empathy and some people are motivated to do so. In I know that in the world of, of therapy, that therapists who work with sex abusers, one strategy they have is for people who are, you know, severe involves fear of sex abuse, perpetrators of it, who have no empathy for the victims, that sometimes they'll show videos, to them, of victims tearfully talking about their experience of being a victim. And only in seeing the tremendous distress and the tears of these victims. Will they begin understanding, you know, what was what's going on for the other person, or sometimes they'll give an account the therapist will give the person Using an account of someone and say, okay now write, write an essay or write out what you think the victims experience was. And so he's had to write in, you know, first person account and what the experience was like. And these things then can evoke a certain degree of empathy, compassion. So I believe that compassion and empathy even though I think it can be developed, and then the question is, is it something that any of us would like to spend time developing? Is there value in that? Is there value exploring and developing our capacity for empathy and compassion? Or is it is it so difficult to hold domain of it, or doesn't have a place in their lives? How valuable is it? How precious is it? to cultivate compassion? When you realize that it might save someone's life? There's no there's no monetary value you can put on how important it is to develop and cultivate compassion. And who knows when you'll be called on? Who knows when you'll have an encounter, where you might save someone's life or the equivalent. So the two wings of Buddhism, wisdom and compassion. And the wisdom part is said to come is very much involved with mindfulness practice, insight, practice, learning how to be present in a very clear way developing our capacity to see and be present. Compassion arises from that clarity of seeing. But also compassion can be something we cultivate and develop. So we come to a situation, and it's the response. It's a natural response. And we've learned how to respond in a wise way. So that's the extent of my thinking this week on this topic of compassion. And I feel a little bit like him, kind of ending Nowhere to kind of like, you know, but just kind of this, this is the end of my words. Oh, it's also time to end. So

me each of you discover or it may each of you appreciate the tremendous preciousness of compassion as it makes its way through this world. Thank you all now See you in a few weeks