

2003-10-20 Halloween/Hungry Ghosts

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SPEAKERS

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So it's becoming almost a tradition that the drummer friends puts on a Halloween party of sorts and ritual. And it's almost a tradition that they then beforehand asked me to give a talk the Monday before their party, their event, talking about the Buddhist idea of hungry ghosts and demons. So, that's what I'll do. I'll give a talk called kind of a Halloween talk Halloween ish talk perhaps. And I find it very interesting that you know, the meaning of the word Halloween, maybe some not all of you know, not all of you maybe know, you know, native English. And the word hollow from Halloween means sacred and that he is part of how weed means evening, I guess in English or Old English or Scottish or no Irish or Welsh or I don't know. And, and so it's the sacred evening. And it's always the evening before November 1, we usually say it's the last evening of October. But the really important date is that is the last evening before November 1. And November 1 is All Saints Day. How many of you knew that you all know this. And it's All Saints Day, and which is a very sacred day right? all the saints you know, Mother Teresa will be there. You know, it's, it's a very important day. And so what's so what's interesting is a day before this sacred, saintly day is become accustom to invite or respect or be frightened by Local demons and ghosts and witches and wizards and kids. And, and there is some wisdom, I think to having before, just before going to opening to the more sacred pure part of the day, a calendar to that part which is more demonic, you know angels in the old times were frightening beings. Nowadays they've been thoroughly domesticated and, and become you know, more than to become a commercial product to all these wonderful sweet angelic things and sweet angels and but there was a time when, when at least in the Judeo Christian tradition where angels could be quite frightening and people wrestle with angels and Abraham and wrestle with angels and it was it Jacob anyway, people wrestled with it, you know and so before kind of this sacred time I like the idea that there's just time to open up to recognize that part of ourselves which is the part of society or life, which is more the opposite of that demonic. And I feel more confidence in that movement that actually the movement to purity or sacred or saintly or whatever, would go through a recognition of paying respects of opening to that which is difficult than the hindrances, the obstacles, the afflictive emotions, that which we're most frightened of. And then opening to an opening up to what's most frightens us is a

wonderful gate to real realistic kind of inner peace or peace or purity. And I've known plenty of people who've been attached to purity attached to peace, inner peace, attached to the saintly who've done so at the expense of ignoring that part of themselves that part of society, which is frightening or terrifying. And it seemed very lopsided and very unhealthy, that kind of sharp division between the two. It's been said sometimes that Buddhism doesn't hold up a very sharp duality between the sacred and the profane or the sacred and the saintly the pure and the impure or their saintly in the demonic. In a sense, because the Enlightenment that Buddhism ultimately points towards, is belongs to a dimension of life, which is considered to be separate from that which is saintly and demonic or pure and impure, or maybe even beyond or separate from that which is sacred and profane. Those kind of dualities don't quite make sense as you get into the practice deeply. There's a tradition there's a story from the Zen tradition. Maybe I have a legendary story of a very pure Buddhist monk in China. And he was known for his purity and part of his saintly quality was that the animals would come in to him and eat out of his hands and the birds would land in his shoulder and it was very, very beautiful. And then he met a Zen teacher in practice with him and under the Zen teachers total, he became enlightened. And after he became enlightened, the animal stopped coming to him. So exactly what the story means I'm not sure. But I think it's a very interesting story that perhaps, take mysteries idea he was attached to his purity. In somehow with his enlightenment to that period, that attachment he was freed from it, and somehow the animals relate to him differently. The Buddhist cosmology posits six different realms of existence. And kind of maybe like the way that Christian cosmology a certain type would posit three, four realms of existence. Maybe they're more, but you know, there's hell, at least the ones that Dante went through, right? There's four, you know, there's a human realm, and then there's hell. And then there's the realm of purgatory. And then there's realm of heaven. So there's like, so the Buddhists have six realms. And there's a human realm. And there's a hell realm realm, the Buddhist posit posit Buddhism doesn't have any purgatory in a sense, or less, everything's considered part of purgatory. Because the idea and again, in Christianity is that hell is eternal. Once you go to hell, unless you're done. That's it. And once you get to heaven, I think it's pretty much a done deal up there. I think unless you're Lucifer or something, it's pretty much you know, good, you have a good time. But luckily, there's this place in between, that that's temporary. And you work through your sins, whatever. And eventually you get reborn in heaven. But to hell in heaven, kind of eternal. Buddhism doesn't posit anything eternal in that way, these these dimensions, but they're all dimensions that that beings are cycling through all the time. And you might get reborn for a period of time in hell. And it might seem like eternity, but it's always going to be temporary. And or you might get reborn in heavenly realms in it might seem like eternity, which also temporary, temporary can mean something like 84 million years. So it's a can be a very long time. So there are six realms, so there's the human realm. There is the hell realms, and they're hot tails and cold hills. And there's all kinds of horrible descriptions and Buddhist monks and teachers down through the ages. Haven't been, you know, I know what to do if I were to say above or kind of giving fire and brimstone kind of sermons that would really frighten people to keep their keep people kind of ethically pure, you know, if you do this, if you sleep with your neighbor's wife, you will go to that, you know, hell, you know, 84 million years, we're all the adulterers and describing graphic detail what that's like, and people would listen and they would be good, or tried to be or, or be guilty or afraid. I've known people who've been really afraid of Buddhist tell us if they got

these graphic depictions and be really frightened by the possibility. So Buddhists have, you know, have these great descriptions and you can read about them. It's very rare that I think you find to be a teacher in America. You know, lay out descriptions of these hills. And those of you who come from back religious backgrounds where you thought you free yourself from that kind of thing, or maybe a little bit what's what happened that keeps it I turned the wrong tournament on one corner. I thought I just came to Buddhism and it must be free of all that. And here Gil's talking about cold hotels and hotels and will stay with me. Don't Don't run away yet. And then there's also what's called the animal realm to the so whereas maybe we think of the human animal realms to be part of our realm. Buddhists kind of considered a separate realm from the human realm. Because it's a different place you can get reborn you can get reborn as an earthworm or as a dog or deer, different ways. And, and so that's one of the realms of rebirth is to be animal. One of the characteristics of the animal realm, according to Buddhists, is fear, and confusion. There's a lot of fear and a lot of confusion if you had reborn as an animal. If you get reborn hell, you just have a lot of suffering. Then there's around called the hungry ghosts and the hungry ghosts, right? realms are these beings that have these humongous, the big bellies that look like the radio pop, big, like, you know. And they have these really, really, really narrow, narrow, narrow, narrow throats. I mean, they're so narrow, you can hardly get, you know, a drop of water down there. So these beings are, because these big bellies, they're always hungry, and they can never get enough food into their belly to be satisfied. So they're always roaming around hungry for more wanting. And so is craving. They're kind of tormented by their craving. That's the realm of hungry ghosts. And then there's a realm of the assurance a service leader, sometimes translated as the Titans. And these are kind of like Gods except their big thing. Is there but they suffer winter is jealousy. And so if you have people get to have a lot of jealousy they get reborn is kind of they haven't lived a certain life of purity and goodness know that we're still tormented by their jealousy, they get reborn as these Titans. And the Titans are always going to war with a gods, the jealous of the gods because the gods have been really good. And that's a sixth realm. That's next realm. The fifth realm is that is, is that if the gods and the god realm is just mostly a good good scene except for the Titans Come and fight. And, and there, there's like levels of hell of heaven. So it's like there's levels of hills. And I don't really know so well the levels of heavens but there's at least 33 I think there's 33 levels of hell. in that form realms of Heaven is 33 realms of heaven in the form realms of heaven. And then there's a formless realms of heaven, where the beings don't have any form. They just like you know beings of light or, you know formless beings that and it's really blissful up there. Because there's all these realms and a lot of bliss, a lot of joy. And the lower ones are all about sensual joy and the higher ones more spiritual joy. So those are so hell, animal hungry ghosts, Titans, and heavens, in the sixth realm is the human realm. And that is the realm that we've all been born into, according to Buddhist ideas, classic Buddhist ideas, and etc. best best place to get reborn is actually in the human realm. Because the human realm you have just the right combination. Just the right balance of suffering, and happiness. And see if you could get reborn in the hell realms. You're suffering so much that you just can't do anything but complain, or just suffer or just feel tormented, and you don't get enough presence of mind to be interested in spiritual practice. If you get reborn in the heavenly realms, you have so much joy and happy and happiness and pleasure, that you're not going to be interested in spiritual practice either because why bother? I've been told by my friends who are

meditation teachers in Hawaii, that they'll put on a one day retreat there. It's very hard people, no one really comes. Because the people are feeling a little bit kind of down about their life in Hawaii, they go to the beach, Hawaii being kind of a heavenly realm. So that kind of principle then you know what the heavenly realms but here in the human realm, it says be the only realm really where people can practice where they have enough choice and enough presence of mind to see where they're at and what's going on. That they can start engaging their life to change the current or like the direction their life is going. To move their life into, move towards freedom, develop themselves spiritually. So it's considered very opportune opportune to be born as a human being. And then Buddhist teachers love to give these talks to really drive home, how lucky you are to be as human being, you know how rare it is to be born as a human being. Some of you notice somebody just know how rare this is what they say. If there was a blind turtle, out in the ocean, a blind turtle, and that blind turtle only surfaced up out of surface, you know, his head surface out of the ocean surface, once every hundred years. And there was a log out there in that ocean. That in the middle of that log, there was a hole the chances of that blind turtle surface surfacing its head up to the whole net log is about the chances that a being has to be born as a human being. So this is a great opportunity. Don't blow it might be a long time before you get this chance again. So you get kind of the gist of certain kind of classic Buddhist teaching, then you know, hell and how horrible it is. And even hell, Heaven is not that great. Because, you know, you're gonna eventually you're gonna die from heaven and come back someplace that's lower, it's worse. So, you know, just you want to you want to get off, you want to get out of this cycles. That's the classic view. You don't want to be reborn, any of these six realms of existence. Now, there's a strong current of teaching in Buddhism. And this is especially true in the modern world. That takes these six realms to be symbolic or metaphoric, for states of mind that we've got, we cycle through. In any given day, any given hour, we cycle through the six realms. There are times when we fall into great states of suffering. And life is really hard and it's you know, we kind of have to can't can't hardly see how to go forward and just you know, sometimes suffering human suffering is really seemingly unbearable. It's awful what happens to human being so all of us at times. And then we cycle through stage states, perhaps of being confused and frightened, like animals are supposed to be. Or then we cycle through stages of being like hungry ghosts, just creating machines, we just can't get enough we, we get something we have more and more and more. And then we have periods of being jealous. And then there are times we just blissed out. We just feel great joy and happiness. Things were really great when I was In practicing meditation in Burma, I hadn't practiced Vipassana, except in Asia when I was first practicing it. And I met these practitioners in Asia and Nepal, in Burma, who had practiced in America at IMS. And they kept saying, Oh, I MS is like living in the heavenly realms compared to practicing and retreat here in Asia, and spirit rock, have you ever been there? It's like being in a heavenly realm. It's just, you know, you might be suffering but the places you know, divine is really amazing place. And, or then you might be a human. You know, this kind of kind of metaphor, metaphor, the mythologized version version, the six realms, you're not always a human being. To feel that way. Sometimes. You know, that sometimes your ability to be attentive And use your exercise your power of choice and mindfulness, to bring compassion up, to engage in practice, you know, sometimes it's there and sometimes it's not. What we're trying to do is when it's there to utilize that opportunity more and more, so it becomes a habit becomes a strength, and then we fall back to you

more often. So rather than something we only notice once a week or once a month, or really becomes more and more we find ourselves in the human realm of life. And then we really respect and honor how important it is to wake up to wake up in a census to wake up to be a human being, and not to be lost in these other five realms. And you know, sometimes certain personalities and people can seem to, you know, be more in one realm than the other. You probably know people who are kind of the hungry ghost type. And just always wanting more from you and us can't give them enough more attention more this more than everything and insatiable Need insatiable desire you know, or people who are mostly a bit fear type just seem to be have a lot of fear, and a lot of anxiety and restlessness around that or confusion. So, too, so you know, and it says we all have all realms within us, we all visit them all the time, certain ways, certain degrees. And it's important to be able to recognize all the aspects of ourselves, not just certain aspects of ourselves. If we only think that you know, what's important is to be divine, have divine experiences, to only be in heavenly kind of realms, then it's from the Buddhist point of view, you're actually kind of truncating or separating yourself from important part of who you are. If you only kind of go into the demonic sides or the suffering side, then you're also cutting yourself off from Heart to Heart of who you are, and want to be healthy is to get us so the wholeness of who you are all aspects. And now to leave some things in the shadow though I'm not going to pay attention to that or that I can't admit that no way but rather admit to all of it as it arises see all of it be very honest about all aspects of who we are. And that's partly I think, what Halloween can mean for some people as you kind of take you know, take some Park that's been disowned Park you don't pay attention too much and really kind of indulgent really let it have its day in the sun. In some traditional cultures, all over the world, there was a notion of Carnival and, and, you know, sometimes we still do Carnival little bit here in America, but Carnival was sometimes understood to be kind of a holiday, where all the social norms rules of society were turned upside down. And, and, you know, it certainly was a great way of kind of taking the pressure was building up in society and kind of exhausting it kind of like expanding it. But was also you know, turning everything upside down and letting everybody see different aspects of themselves. Letting the people who are oppressed be, you know, the rulers for the day perhaps or the people who are rulers to be the servants for the day or all kinds of ways and things are turned upside down. And perhaps Halloweens a little bit, that kind of way of turning things upside down so we can see things freshly in a new way. But in some way to spend time with that which we're most afraid of. What do you what are you most afraid of your life? Or what are you most afraid of inside of yourself? What are you most afraid to look at to recognize I was for a long time most afraid to recognize my anger. I should probably should dress up as some you know, angry jealous Titan. And some people some people are afraid of that which is beautiful or that would just tender that which is vulnerable inside of them. Some people are afraid or their fear and we know are tremendously resistance to being, you know, going close to where they're afraid. Some people are afraid of their confusion, admitting they're confused, and having a not knowing mind and you know, they can't show that they have to always kind of be on top of things. What are you most afraid of? Are you willing to face your fears, sit with your fears, be with your fears. Here's a story from the Thai forest tradition. In this tradition, monks would often go sit in the forest and meditate. And this is a story of a monk who accidentally went to stay in a forest located near a charnel ground back, not not so distant past in Thailand. They would they wouldn't bury bodies they would bring bodies out to this open field

and have some distance from the village. They usually burn the body. And then they would just leave the body burning there when everybody went back to their village and would you smolder there until it burned out and then I don't know what they did with the body next, but so the smoke had arrived at a certain village late one afternoon, and being unfamiliar with the area as the villagers where you could find a wooded area suitable for meditation. They pointed to attractive forest claiming it was suitable, but neglected to tell him that it was situated right on the edge of a charnel ground. That then guided him to the forest way past the first night peacefully. On the following day, he saw the villagers past by carrying a corpse, which they soon cremated only a short distance from where he was staying. As he looked on, he could clearly see the burning corpse. He started to grow apprehensive. The moment he saw the coffin being carried past, but he assumed that they were on their way to cremate the body somewhere else. Still, the mere sight of the coffin caused him considerable consternation, as he thought ahead to the coming night. He was worried that the image of the coffin would haunt him after dark, making it impossible for him to sleep. As it turned out, he had camped on the edge of the charnel ground, so he was obliged to watch the corpse as the corpse was burned right in front of him. This site upset him even more, causing him severe discomfort, as he contemplated the prospect of having to spend the night there, feeling very uneasy from the first sight of the corpse passing by feeling gradually intensified until he was so terrified that by nightfall, he could hardly breathe. Once all the villagers had gone home, leaving him alone, Tormund began in earnest. He could not keep his mind focused on meditation because whenever he closed his eyes to meditate, he saw a long line of ghosts moving toward him. Before long ghosts hovered around him in groups in images which frightened him so much that all presence of mind deserted him, throwing him into a panic. His fear began in mid afternoon, at the first sight of the corpse. By the time darkness fell all around, his fear had become so intense, he was just barely able to cope. Since ordaining as a monk, he had never experienced anything like this struggle with visions of ghosts. At least he was mindful enough to begin reflecting the fear, the fear the ghosts, all of it may simply be a delusion. It is more likely that these haunting images of ghosts are creations of my own mind. As a monk, he was expected to be steadfast and fearless when facing death, ghosts or any other danger. So he remind, reminded himself, people everywhere praise the fearless courage of monks. Here I am shamelessly afraid of ghosts. I'm acting like a total failure, as though I have ordained to just to live in fear of ghosts and goblins, without any rhyme or reason. I'm a disgrace to my fellow monks. I am unworthy of admiration of people who believe we are noble warriors fearing nothing. How can I let this happen? Having reminded himself of this, and roundly criticizing himself for failing to live up to these high standards, resolved that he would force himself to face the fear directly from then on the corpse of smolder before him on the funeral pyre. being the cause of his fear he decided to go there immediately. Putting on his robe. He started walking straight for the funeral pyre, which he saw clearly glowing in the darkness. But after a few steps, his legs 10 step and he could hardly move. His feet is hard to pounded. His body began to perspire profuse profusely As they're exposed to midday sun, seeing that this was not going to Well, he quickly adjusted his tack. Starting with small deliberate steps, he placed one foot just in front of the other, not a lot not allowing his forward motion to stop. By that time, he was relying on sheer strength of will to push his body forward, frightened to death and shaking uncontrollably. He nevertheless kept his resolve to walk on, as though his life depended on it. Struggling the entire way, eventually reached the

burning corpse. But instead of feeling relieved that he had achieved his objective, he felt so think he could barely stand about to go crazy with fear, he forced himself to look at the partially burned corpse. Then, seeing the skull burned white from long exposure to the fire. He got such a fright, that he nearly fainted straightaway, brave bravely suppressing his fear, he sat down to meditate just a short distance. From the burning fire, he focused on the corpse using it as an object of his meditation, while forcing his terrified heart to mentally recite continuously. I am going to die. Just like this corpse. There's no need to be afraid. I'm going to die someday too. There's no point in being afraid. Sitting there grappling with his fear of ghosts and forcing his heart to repeat this meditation on death. He heard a strange sound just behind him. Chest up here. Sound of approaching footsteps the footstep stopped, then started again. Slow and cautious, as if someone were sneaking up to pounce on him from behind. Or so he imagined at the time. His spot his fear now reached its peak. He was poised to jump up and run away crying ghosts. Hell. But he managed to control this impulse and waited, listening nervously as the footsteps slowly drew near, and stopped a few yards away. poised to run, he heard a strange sound like someone chewing loud and crunchy. The scent is imagination racing. What's it chewing on around here? Next, it'll be chewing on my head. This cruel heartless ghost is sure to me in the end of me. Unable to stand the suspense any longer, decided to open his eyes should a situation look drastic, he was prepared to run for his life, a far better option than just letting some terrible ghost devour him. Escaping now he reasoned. We'll give him the chance to resume my practice later with renewed diligence, whereas I am gaining nothing by sacrificing my life to this ghost. With that, he opened his eyes and turn to look in the direction of the chewing crunching Sounds all set to make a dash for his life. peering through the darkness to catch a glimpse of the terrible ghost he had imagined. He saw instead a village dog, casually chewing the scraps of food left by the villagers as offerings to spirits as part of the local custom. It comes scrounging for something to fill its stomach is hungry animals are want to do, and it wasn't at least bit interested in him sitting there. suddenly realizing that it was only a dog, the monk laughed at his own folly, turning his attention to the dog, which showed no interest in him whatsoever he thought, so you're the arm you're the almighty specter that nearly drove me crazy. You taught taught me the lesson of my life. With this self with with self, admonishing him fresh in his mind, the monk made its own bow. I will not leave this place until I've overcome my fear of ghosts. I have to die. Try then so be it. I can't defeat this fear that I won't deserve to continue living in such disgrace. Others might follow my bad example. Becoming useless people themselves, does further increasing the burden on the on them sustenance on them on the teachings. So without himself that from that moment on remaining that cemetery day and night, as a way of dealing sternly with this fear. And it goes on and on, and then he ends by saying, eventually transformed himself into a monk of incredible courage in all circumstances. This whole experience had a profound and lasting impact on his spiritual development. His fear of ghosts gave rise to an outstanding lesson in the teaching those converting him into a truly authentic monk. So what are you afraid of? So there is a tradition in Buddhism, that the things that frighten us the most are just projections of our own mind. And I think maybe they can be sometimes, even sometimes we're afraid of other people, sometimes a projection of our own mind. There's a story A friend of mine had a dream many years ago, and maybe, sorry if I told the story recently or not. He the green, he was holding a poisonous snake by the neck. And if you hold a poisonous snake by the neck, it's safe. can't bite you.

But he wants to let go of the snake. But he couldn't let go because then it could turn around and bite him. So he's holding it what to do what to do what to do. And finally in the dream, he let go of the snake. We let go the snake. The snake vanished What are you afraid of? This thing you know the theme What are you afraid of? What are you holding on to? And the last store ghost story demons story actually milarepa was famous Tibetan aesthetic, who spent years and years living in a cave. He was altimas Cave one day and he came back. And there were these five ferocious horrible demons. big teeth, gripping blood downs, you know, his face just it's red fiery eyes, you know, there to get him any golf, they looked at them and he said, Hmm. You know, I know why they're here. I've been here for many years there the demons of this cave, but I've never made off Thanks to them, they were paid my respects to them. So he made some offerings and he paid his respects and honored them. To have them receded away with three of them kept coming at him. So he said, Oh, the thing to do is to frighten them as he made his huge wrathful fury, gestures of fury and gnashed his teeth. And And sure enough, two of them got frightened. And they receded into the cave. And that left one left, the biggest one, the most ferocious one coming after him coming after you, right? And what are you going to do now? All your strategies, you know, I've worked the respectful strategies that kind one, the friendly ones worked. The ferocious ones worked were those first four, but the biggest one, those don't work. So then he Thought he considered all these demons. These demons are just a product of my own mind. And then he laid himself down the mouth of the biggest one and it's vanished. So you have a wonderful Halloween. You have any comments or questions like to make we have about five minutes It seems complete enough. You're all properly frightened. stunned yes was not so much fun. Probably, it was there from day one, in that it was part of the Indian cosmology at the time of the Buddha. And so it was just there already. He was raised in that cosmology wasn't Buddhist cosmology was just the Indian cosmology of his time. And there were a lot of elements that were not considered a Buddhist, that were not the Buddhists were originally just part of the, of the local scene. And, and the six realms, I think we're just part of that early scene. And then how much was the Buddha interested in it? Did a Buddha believe in it that he see it as being a symbolic of states of mind or do you see as being real realities? It's really hard to know. There certainly is a lot of evidence to indicate indications in the early literature, that some of these things like Mara, the Buddhist devil was understood in symbolic ways as aspects of one's own mind rather than an external being. And it's hard to know in the modern world, there's much stronger tendency to see these as representing vs you know, symbolic representation of mental states rather than external realities. This is the biography of the venerable Ācariya Mun. Ajahn Mun is in a sense the spiritual grandfather to Ajahn Amaro, the Thai forest tradition that Thanissaro Bhikkhu comes from and Ajahn Sumedho, and Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Amaro and all those people. They all trace the origins to this man here who lived. Well, I think he died in about relatively old man, I think about 1948. And so he kind of spanned the 19th and 20th centuries. And he kind of re discovered and rediscovered many he kind of his own practice and his own being who he was and his own realization gave birth to the what's now called the Thai forest tradition. And there's a lot of stories like this in this book. So I hope all of you find an occasion to sit down and meditate in the midst of what frightens you the most. Thank you.