

2004-04-28 Foundations of Buddhist Spiritual Life: Right Intention (Week 1 Part 1)

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So welcome. So for many years, I've been teaching an intro to mindfulness practice. And I started in 1990. When I first started, or so in 1991, perhaps the first intro class in Palo Alto, and I've never taken an intro to meditation class when I gave one. And I just, I've been introduced to Vipassana meditation in Southeast Asia. And they didn't do intro classes there. They just, you know, in about 20 minutes, I told you what the practice was, and then send you to do it for eight months in a row or something, and you kind of learned more as it went along. But the idea of a gradual class over five weeks as I did, it, was something that was, you know, I'd never experienced, but when I started teaching here in California, my colleagues just Corfield he was training me, they had already had institutionalized the system of offering a six week introductory course. So I figured, well, I'm supposed to be a teacher, and I should do that too. But I never taken all those courses. And another six weeks was way too long. So I made it five weeks. And, and then I made it up. And, and I found out some years later that my other teeth, friends or colleagues, they made it up differently. But I made it up my way. And so some of you have gone to my intro class. And I enjoyed doing it a lot in my enjoyment in getting into requests keeps growing, the longer I do it, and I look forward to doing it. And I was a little bit reluctant to only do it twice this year. But I wanted to also be able to teach other things I want to teach other kind of introductory classes kind of in the same spirit and same way in which I do the intro to meditation class and asked what I thought of this class. Introduction to the fundamentals of Buddhist life, Buddha's spiritual life. And it's meant kind of as a real basic class, a beginner's kind of class. Some of you are wondering why you're here. But that is as it is. And we'll be offering amendment is a basic introductory class. I've never taken a class introduction to the fundamentals of Buddhist spiritual life. And as far as I know that my colleagues have ever taught this kind of class. So it's something new, and for me to teach. And as I thought about it, I thought of a lot of different ways to approach the fundamentals of Buddhism, the foundations of Buddhist practice. And sometimes my mind would just go in all directions. And so I had Catholic teach this and the math and this and that, and that, and then we have a two year class, just to get through the fundamentals. But one of the beautiful things about the Dharma is that the different elements of Dharma practices in the spiritual life, overlap interrelate, contain each other. So that you could actually just pick up one element and many of the others would follow in its wake or follow in it. And some people have pointed out to just practicing ethics. The precepts is a very powerful practice and brings along with it all kinds of wonderful qualities, developed spiritual life, just doing focusing on ethics. It could be argued that just doing mindfulness practices, all you need to do and everything else will follow. I think that in order for the mindfulness is very powerful.

And I believe everything you need, will mostly follow along if you're very diligent and careful with your mindfulness practice. But there's much more to a Buddhist life than just being mindful. And sometimes I feel a little bit sad when I get the impression from some of the People that I teach that all they're allowed to do in their spiritual life is Be mindful nonreactive awareness of what's happening in the present moment. And spirit spiritual life is much broader than just presence nonreactive awareness. And, and in the Buddhist tradition, there's many factors which you consider to be supportive of mindfulness practice. And so you get these foundations in place first before you do mindfulness practice. A friend of mine many years ago, woman from Taiwan, who had come to America as an adult, was raised as a Buddhist, and was studying doctoral studies of Buddhist studies at Stanford. And she was quite, you know, serious about Buddhist practice. She had a Buddhist teacher and devoting our life to it. And I asked her if she meditated and I assume that you know, pretty much anybody who's serious that serious about Buddhism would meditate. And your answer surprised me She said,

No, not yet. I'm, I'm working on myself so that I'm worthy enough to meditate. That's something. So she has kind of the classic kind of Asian idea of Buddhism, that you don't just kind of put yourself into meditation cold, but you actually prepare yourself for that. And by doing other things first, and creating a really good foundation for meditation. So some of the other elements of Buddhism are their supports for mindfulness practice itself and make it go it makes it go become stronger, mature better, in a healthier and safer way. But a spiritual life in the Buddhist terms is much more than just being mindful. It involves a whole orientation of how we live in the world. And that orientation then informs Buddhists in all their choices and how they live their lives, their choices of including things like how what kind of work they do How they you know, their activities in the world and the purchases perhaps what they buy, what they don't buy, and how they relate to neighbors and community and to nature around them. And there's a tremendous amount of, you know, Buddhist life is not just meditation, it's about how we live our life. And I would suggest that that is the title of this as a Buddhist life. Many people are trying to look at how to put some Buddhism into their life, how to, you know, sprinkle some mindfulness back to the sprinkle some good things in Buddhism to improve their life and all that. And that's fine. And we often often very happy to offer Buddhist practice as a spicing in people's lives or the little medicine in their lives that helps them but you know, it's kind of like adapting Buddhism for your life. And there's a whole other approach which is to adapt your life to Buddhism and live a Buddhist life. It's possible to do that. And some people will do more, to greater and lesser degrees. And I'm not here to tell you what you should be doing, or I don't really have any expectation in what you're supposed to be doing. But I thought it'd be nice to offer this kind of class and give you my take on what I think is the foundations. And then you can pick up and do with that what you'd like. And since you showed up, you're you know, it's just, it's a self selecting audience, right? I don't have to worry about trying to, you know, I'm not propagated here or anything. I'm just talking to people who seem to want to come to this. So

So what we'll do in these five weeks is, much like the way we do for the intro to meditation class mindfulness class, is go through elements of Buddhist practice, which builds on each other to support each other. And just like an intro in my first class, if you get it sense of how to work with the breath, it's easier to work with the body, you have good sense how to work with the body, it's easier to work with, with emotions, in good sense how to work with emotions is easier to work with your mental life and thoughts. And if you have good sense how to work with your thoughts and mental life, it's a lot easier to apply the practice in your daily life. So in the same way, this class is built on things, it's built on each other. So today I'm going to talk about the basic ideas of the, the orientation of a Buddhist life, and the

intention of orientation and intention. And then that'll be a support for next week when we talk about some of the what can in short and short can be called to the ethical issues of Buddhism. But I prefer to call them the relational, that aspect of our life. We try to live wisely in relationship to others. And that has to do with ethics and it has to do with with generosity. The third week, we'll build on that and it'll be a little bit more than a relational aspect of life. And this will be the aspects of love. The Buddhist take on love which is has to do also with relationship with others and the world around us. And the following week we'll talk about the idea of what's called Buddhism cultivation, developing oneself, that a Buddhist life is one is concerned with developing oneself in various ways, improving oneself, developing one's mind one's heart. And then the final week we'll talk about after we talked about developing, we'll talk about letting go. And letting go is also a very important part of the path and letting go is that which ultimately will lead to the fruition of the Buddhist life, which is liberation.

There are many different models or ideas of what a spiritual path is about. Do you find many of them just in Buddhism itself, and sometimes people are at odds with each other, which happens is better which one is the highest truth and which one is false or whatever. I'm actually not so interested in comparing that way different paths. I think they are, I kind of take it as a, as a tenant that all as all kind of ways of practicing are valid for different people at different times. And so they all point to something that's very important. And I'm actually more interested in how they all can be seen as being in harmony with each other, rather than how they can be opposed to each other. So if you if you come with your own notions, ideas of a spiritual life and a path from some other tradition, or the Buddhist tradition or your own inclinations, you might carry that with you as a principle you might explore them during these weeks, is rather than being in opposition to what I'm saying, see if you can find some way to incorporate it, to assimilate it or use it to support maybe the way you you understand things or how you'd like to understand things. The particular idea of Buddhist life or spirit Virtual life by the Buddha is could be understood as being a developmental model of the path or developmental model of, of life that is very much in harmony with or in, goes along with the idea of human development, in a rough sense in the sense that in the sense that you look at a child and how a child grows up, many of us are concerned with how children grow. And we teach them and teach them, academics, we teach them values, we teach them, all kinds of things. And as children grow as they both because of the way they're taught, and because the environment and because of internal things, biological things that the child has themselves. They develop, they grow, and you can see stages of children developing over time. And it'd be foolish to not notice and be wise about the development of children over time and somehow incorporate that into our relationship to children and support the development of children over time and how they develop So, when a person becomes an adult, in a normal, healthy environment, that's kind of when the Buddhist path would begin. And then that developmental trajectory continues. It's just a normal kind, almost biological thing that happens just like biologically whatever children develop over time. So, once we get into becoming an adult, we're not fixed beings anymore, it can be fixed thing. We're still capable of continued development. And I would suggest that in a healthy environment, that that probably we would all develop quite beautifully through our adult years, and so in probably some of you can recognize changes in yourself in your adult years. Things that values you had or concerns you had or, or difficulties you had earlier in life as an adult, are no longer here. Now you see things differently because your stage of life you're in. So that so the Buddha saw the spiritual life in developmental terms. And that things can change and cultivate and develop with time. And that that development has certain patterns certain laws that he would see the Buddha I think would say was are universal. And so, he would then lay lay down the spiritual life as a path of gradual cultivation development. what that implies is that Buddhists are phenomenally patient. Buddhists are not into instant gratification, but rather kind of like good adults. They think that if you

want something, it takes a while to get it. It takes a while to develop certain skills, develop certain qualities, understandings. And just like if you know, if you want to go and develop your body by going to a local gym, you don't expect to go to the gym. And you know, lift up a couple of barbells and then go home and that's it to instant enlightenment and instant strength and that's it. But you know, it takes a while to develop yourself and you need to, you need to have certain attitudes and approaches and discipline to developing your body by going to the gym, because of consistency of wise approach to what you do have patience, a whole bunch of attitudes that are nice to have if you're not going to suffer while you're doing it. So the same thing, in in doing a Buddhist spiritual life, it takes a wise attitude, wise understanding, it takes patience, it takes a sense that we actually kind of that there's a goal or direction, directionality in that development. Now, the Buddha said that the Dharma is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end. He said that a lot. And how I understand that is that Dharma practice,

the Dharma life is meant to be good. its inception. It's meant to be good in the middle of doing it, and it's good. It's meant to be great at the fruit. At the end of it, there is supposed to be a good thing. It's supposed to be a beneficial thing. And it's meant to be something that that brings happiness. Happiness is one of the keys to the Buddhist spiritual life. It's about, it's about developing happiness of different kinds. It's about understanding the nature of happiness, understanding how to develop it, understanding how to support it, and understanding how it can be a healthy goal for our lives to develop our capacity to be happy. Happiness is really important part of what we're going to talk about in these five weeks. And hopefully, as we talk about these different elements of the fundamentals, either through or what I say, hopefully, or through your own understanding, you will be able to connect to these different elements to how these things support your capacity to be happy, and that you hopefully after five weeks, become a happier person. That would be great. Wouldn't it make me very happy and maybe it'll just be increments, you know, we don't do instant gratification here. But that's kind of like the name of the game. You're not supposed to become a green Buddhist, you know, or, you know, you know, bear down or go around kind of, you know, you know, with a flag of suffering and say I'm a Buddhist I look at suffering in life is suffering. And, you know, and this isn't a terrible and you just have to be really serious about your Buddhism. One of the things that kills the Buddha's spiritual life is excessive seriousness. So remember once telling my Zen teacher, you know, I'm not very serious, but this Zen practice, I was living in the monastery. I'm not so serious, but the Zen practice, but it's what I'm most serious about in my life.

So, so, no, it can be for someone who wants to really adopt a life of practice. They can have greater priority than anything else. But even in that case, don't be too serious about it don't Association weighs you down, it's supposed to be good. It's supposed to bring happiness. delight is supposed to gladden the heart. So you want to kind of take that approach as you do as you explore all this. Another element that I want to point out as an introduction is that it's useful to think of the Buddhist spiritual life, or the Buddhist development as a pyramid as a three sided pyramid. And the importance of having a pyramid as a model for the path is a pyramid has a wide stable base. And it's little bit hard to tip over push over a pyramid, because that's solid base. And so what's at the top of the pyramid is supported by the whole, you know, pyramid below it. And so what you would do if you want to build a stable pyramid, you first kind of lay the strong, broad foundation base, and then you build something that's Almost as wide above that, and it's a bit, it's almost as wide above that, until the finally you get really high. And you get this little point at the very top. If you just had a, a future point was to get to the top point really quickly, or you know, just you know, and you had a very straight and narrow path that didn't create the

foundation, you'd have like a stick like this standing up like this. And then it would just fall over. And, and it just, you know, falls over all the time. And I know lots of people who've taken that kind of fast route and Buddhist practice that kind of dived into the practice or be engaged in or experience. Some of the, I guess I should say, the highest that was the deepest, the highest is consistent with the metaphor, the highest aspects of Buddhist practice. And they've you know, it's been quite rewarding in some ways, with their lives have been like this as a result, and sometimes frightful, quite plain. So it's very difficult for them to come back from that kind of peak experience. Because they haven't integrate the rest of their life they haven't don't haven't created that broad foundation. And it's much healthier for people to create this broad foundation first, for the highest practice and highest realization. So you won't be a little bit careful with teachers who want to give you the highest teaching right away. like myself, like you can come into my five week intro in my mindfulness class. It turns out that mindfulness is considered the hardware of the highest teachings. So be a little bit leery of people like me. And there was a Burmese teacher up in Sebastopol. Her name is Dr. Tintin. And she wants to told me that, you know, in Burma people don't teach. People are not taught mindfulness off the street like they are in America. Mindfulness is the cream because it is kind of like the top of the pyramid. And you would first do a lot of other work first preparing you for that higher point, you know in Tibet and prior They have no new intro, which you spend all this preparation practice you do 100,000 prostrations and 100,000 monitors and hundred thousands and making a little Buddhist statues and I know what the other thing is hundred hundred thousand offerings. And that's a lot of things to do. And, and that's kind of the preparation of body, mind and speech to get you to, to a point where you're ready psychically and physically, to receive higher and deeper teachings. It's capable of giving people higher and deeper teachings, but it's not so useful unless they have that good, good wide base. So I said the triangle is a three sided triangle because the three sides are body speech in mind. And so every layer as you go up the pyramid has a physical aspect of bodily aspect. It has a vocal aspect and it has a heart aspect. Your mind, aspect heart and mind are the same. So body speech and heart or body, speech and mind, whatever you prefer. And so it's very important to understand that has those three aspects. Because again, sometimes people who engage in Buddhist practice tend to focus on one more than the other. And most commonly, they tend to focus on the mind or the heart, the inner life, as if it's all about changing something on the inside, changing your mind or developing some kind of mentality, some kind of great mental experience of bliss or oneness or whatever it is people think, or about changing, changing the mind in some way. It's all mental kind of thing. And Buddhist practice is not meant to be just a mental thing. It's meant to be

totally integrated in what with our full humanity. And the way that said in the tradition, is practice involves body speech, and mind. So three sides of the pyramid, and so each layer has that those three sides so we look at how it affects our speech, how it affects our behavior, and also how it affects our hearts and how it relates to the heart and the mind. So I'd like us to do a short meditation a few minutes. And, but as an introduction to it, I'd like to give another piece having to do with the heart or the mind, but it also applies to the body, and speech. And that is all aspects of our psycho physical being, is understood in Buddhism to be relatively malleable. If it if it if it's developed, if it's cultivated with human being is human being is a process. Another thing, if you want to try to find your true self, which some people like to use our kind of language, Buddhists would say, you won't find a thing as your true self. You'll find a process, you find an activity. This that's a movement in flux changing and because the human being is a series of processes. And because they are fixed processes that profit process, it's possible to shape those processes. It's possible to shape the mind because the mind is a process and not a thing. Or the heart is. It's possible to, to to change how we speak. Because speech is a process and not a fixed thing. It's possible to change our body of our behavior because it's a

process another thing. And so part of Buddhist practice then is taking some responsibility for these processes of body speech in mind, and beginning to shape them in ways they're healthy, helpful, and healing. And so, how do we shape what is healthy, what is healing what is helpful for us is a big part of what we'll talk about in a while. But you know, so for example, if you feel that it's helpful to be kinder it might be easy to decide to be kind just like that. But it's possible to cultivate and change the heart, the mind. So that becomes a disposition or inclination of the heart of the mind, to respond to situations greater kindness. It's possible develop kindness over time, it's possible to develop generosity, it's possible to build wisdom and love, mindfulness concentrations, a lot of capacities that can be developed. And probably it doesn't take it wouldn't take a lot of reflection, any of your parts. If you were honest about yourself, to recognize the ways in which your dispositions, your inclination, the way that you tend to operate in the world has been shaped by forces outside of you, by things like advertisement, or the media or the media, or your local environment. I was surprised when I came to Palo Alto in 1990 that I had to see you know, old beat up Toyota cars, very happy to have And then, for many years, I was very happy having in Palo Alto. But at some point after being there about I think about five or six or so years, I started noticing that I think we had one of the oldest cars in Palo Alto. And there was this kind of thing of kind of beginning kind of sense. I was different. You know, there always seems to be like a lot of people fall out to have newish cars. And there's a feeling Oh, you know, not quite right. It's not quite right for me to have sold cars. I'm not quite adequate. And I could feel that this kind of environment no one was doing anything saying anything. No one was telling me Gil, you know, you should think about your car. But you know, it just the environment lended itself to kind of influencing the shape of my thoughts and my disposition and kind of what I thought was I needed to have so the mind so I use a little story as an example of how the mind is can be shaped by the environment, and by media by friends. I've been shaped to some of my friends, hanging out with them. Sometimes not to the best. was younger I remember hanging out with people who influenced me ways that I'm embarrassed to say some of the things, some of the ways that I grew. I was when I had a leather jacket and a motorcycle, I was in a pseudo motorcycle gang.

So come a long way. So the idea of shaping and it takes some responsibility for that shaping. But doing it doing it in a way that brings you happiness doesn't doesn't come as a burden, or a feeling that you should be different or you better be different. You're inadequate and some terrible way. It's embarrassing, but rather to do it with a kind of sense of uplift and lightness and joy. Oh yeah, it's great that human beings are this way we have this capacity to develop and I can engage in it and I don't know how long it's gonna take to make a change, but at least it's great to know this and to incline them a heart in that direction. So taking a stab posture, you might think again of the pyramid. As you make your posture for those people sitting cross legged, you get, you know, more obviously a sense of a pyramid. But the idea whatever way you sit, to get a sense of a stable base, perhaps a broad base, feeling that the lower part of your body relaxing and relaxing your weight downwards letting your chair or the floor receive you hold you

spending some time with your body, feeling your body becoming familiar with your body, body speech and mind that we kind of locus of practice. So just now for now just become familiar with your body as it is right now.

Explore it, explore different parts of it. Check it out how it feels, what's going on in it.

My guess is that most of you as you're sitting here, having some thoughts going through your mind. For now we can just provisionally call that the vocal part of speech part. You're talking to yourself. As you're sitting here, see if you can take a little bit responsibility for what you're thinking about. And think about your body. Be stay in your body, think about your body and think about your body, long terms in in kind ways or happy ways. See if you can find some thoughts or some ideas, some understandings of your body that bring you a sense of goodwill towards your body, or sense of happiness or delight about your body. This is not positive thinking, you know, trying to pretend with. Can you find some sincere thought goodwill delight

and then within the body as part of the body. Become aware of your breathing. You have meditation instruction before we get it, forget your instructions and take a few minutes just to become familiar with what it's like. Like to be breathing at this particular time. Feeling your breath

let yourself think. Don't have to stop your thinking. Let's see if you can discover in your in the realm the world of your thoughts, your understanding your ideas. If you have any thoughts or can have any thoughts or ideas that involve goodwill toward your breathing or a sense of happiness or delight concerning your breathing

And then bring your attention more carefully to your breathing. Feel your breathing in your torso, your belly or just feel the movement there the expansion and contraction.

feel the rhythm of breathing in and out.

As you exhale, see if you can relax and settle into that broad base that you're the weight of your body, sink a little bit as you exhale. The weight of your belly or torso, relaxing any tension might be carrying in your torso and your belly chest

Letting the breath wash through you in breath and out breaths, letting it wash through your mind so that every time you exhale you let go of your thinking almost as if the breath or the waves washing up, up and down across the shore. And as the waves go out leave the shore. As you exhale, it takes away our thoughts carries them out to the sea.

So we're doing something very simple. being present here for a body or breath your thoughts soften, float away as we breathe out.

Is there anything about doing this? here now? Which gives you some inkling of happiness or delight or joy or satisfaction?

Is there some happiness to be found? In sitting quietly being attentive to what is here

If there is some happiness Can you let that happiness support your attention to the breathing to be part of it

Is there any sense of well being, to be had? It's available as you sit here, quietly being in your body might be feeling other things also discomfort or many things which might be uncomfortable. But even with that, can you find some inkling of well being

And then as part of this short sitting meditation time, I'd like to ask you some reflective questions of questions for you to think about in your, your eyes are still quite closed. And if you'd like to, if you're uncomfortable at all at this point, you're welcome to change your posture. See more comfortable for the reflection?

What is your relationship to happiness?

You feel like it's okay to be happy. It's something you'd like to experience.

Happiness appear to appear to you to be a profound goal of life or a superficial goal. Does it seem excessively selfish to be to pursue happiness?

What's your relationship? to happiness

is it a stranger to you?

is being happy. A gift for others? Have you ever felt somebody else's happiness as a gift to you?

What do you know about the healthy and appropriate pursuit of happiness?

What stands in the way of your happiness