

2005-01-31 Four Heavenly Messengers

Thu, 7/16 4:24PM • 25:15

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

life, buddha, myth, people, encounter, person, palaces, suffering, motivated, engage, juxtaposition, stay, isolated, plowing, group, spiritual, motivation, pleasant, story, protected

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So, I would like to give a talk right here. Okay, speakers working okay for everyone. I would like to give a talk on, I'd like to give a participatory talk in that you're supposed to participate. So I'm telling you that listen in a way that you're going to know you're going to participate all of you at some point. And what I'm going to do is I'm going to tell you a myth. It's a Buddhist myth. And there's many versions of this myth. Some are quite elaborate, some are somewhat modest. It has to do with the story of the Buddha life. We don't really know that much about him. We so very hard to tease apart facts from fiction fiction fact from myth, by then calling it a myth. You know, myths. functions in human lives are stories that are very different than they do work that the fact is that true stories have that they're offering, metaphorical or they point to something, some aspect of the human life or human psyche that, you know, points to something that's some people will say is true. Even though the story itself might not be true, it's pointing to some piece of wisdom or understanding that is very useful, helpful. And one of the ways to work with myth is, is to have your own interpretation of a myth to look and see, what is it about this myth that I can relate to? How can I make this myth my own? or How can I interpret in a way that is meaningful for me in my life, rather than reacting to the myth and say, well, that has nothing to do with me? It only has something to do with you, if you choose to make it that way. And so you can stay cannot pass them in distances. And when I touch that, or you can say, well, that's interesting. It's in them yet then. Well, if I look at My life through that filter through understanding that's this is what I understand that's useful to see that. So I'm going to offer you a myth. And so the way it's participatory is that you have to engage in this myth, hoping you'll engage with it, and somehow find meaning in it for yourself. It's actually so the myth has to do with how the Buddha came to engage in a spiritual quest. How he kind of was motivated to start a spiritual life, his Buddhist practice, his quest for liberation. And there are two parts to the story. The first part has to do with when he was six years old. It's a story that often told by only usually tell one version of the myth and don't want to tell a different version of the myth this evening. The story as it's told in the more elaborate versions of the Buddha's life, is the Buddha was the son of the king. And part of how a king asserts His sovereignty in this myth is to preside over the spring planting festival kind of ritual plowing of the

first plowing of this spring. Somehow that's supposed to assert his authority in places among the population. And the Buddha, being six years old was kind of left on the edge of the field under the in the shade of a rose apple tree, kind of forgotten temporarily, while the king and the entourage and people are out there, plowing the field. And the usual way I've told the story of where I've learned the story, is that in being forgotten, they're on the edge of the field, the Buddha sets peacefully under the tree. And as sometimes a young child might do can do times settled into a very deep state of meditation into what's called the first jhana the first absorption that was characterized Having a lot of joy, love, strong sense of well being. And that sometimes in a child who doesn't have much, maybe self consciousness or preoccupations or worries, a lot of kind of the superficiality of the mind can fall away pretty easily. And sometimes can fall into some state of deep well being meditative well being, without even knowing that's what it is. And that experience became a reference point for the Buddha much later, that experience of well being. And he took that experience of well being as a as a suggestion of how a person can continue in, in doing meditative practice, when he had done everything else available in India at that time, and so that sense of well being was a doorway to a spiritual life. The version of the story I want to tell you here is that in looking at the spring for plowing festival, What he saw when he saw the oxen, the ox, straining under the weight, and under the weight of the, of the plow. And he saw some of the farm hands helping with the plowing, sweating and working really hard in the heat and sweating dripping in sweat straining also with kind of whatever they do directing the plow or taking care of the ox. And he saw that as the plow was, was turning over the soil that it was slicing through all kinds of worms and insects and killing them. And he saw all this suffering. In that event they're supposed to be happy event, this gala event, celebrating the spring spring festival. And he saw that that that the, that the king in asserting His sovereignty, in this ritual way, was causing all this suffering all this death these insects and animals soil and He became discouraged in the path that was given to him as because he was a son of a of a king, that he was also meant to be a king. So Oh, if that's what kings, kingship or rulership brings, I don't want any part of it. And look, this is supposed to be a pleasant event out there. And look all the suffering that people are undergoing. And in that contemplation and thinking about that, he got so absorbed in that contemplation that he entered into this first jhana. And there's this juxtaposition between the recognizing something that was conventionally seen as being a pleasant happy event, their celebration, and all the straining and, and hardness of suffering, that was part of that event. And the juxtaposition of him recognizing that suffering and having a sense of well being an himself. So that's kind of a little bit of complexity of this myth. Then We go forward to a time when the Buddha was 29 years old. There was a prophecy. jumping around a little bit, there was a prophecy early in the Buddha's life, that he would become either a great monarch, or he would become a great spiritual teacher. And we don't see it. And his father wanted the Buddha to follow in the family business. And so the father then tried to protect his son from encountering the world. Because if you count to the world, maybe then he would want to kind of go off and do something else besides being a king. So he raised the Buddha in a very protected environment, where the Buddha would never see someone who was old, never see someone who was sick, and never see someone who was dying. So maybe it's pretty hard to do, I imagine. But so the son the father had built these three palaces for three seasons of the year. And the Buddha growing up was moved around these different palaces and these very ideal

environments. For a protected environment being raised to be a king. One day when he was it said when he was 29 years old, he left the suburbs. And when it you know, went out to a pleasure ride with his chariot and his charioteer and went into a pleasure Park, there was somehow in the area. So here we have this kind of pleasant excursion. That's supposed to happen. And Marley's in this park is pleasure Park going about. He sees an old man, old person. And he's never seen an old person before. And he asks, you know, who's that person over, there's all bent over walking with a cane with long white here, toothless. And, you know, there wasn't plastic surgery and things that they should have in Palo Alto. Now, back then. And in some ways, you know, this kind of story is kind of like someone who maybe grew up in suburbs, you know, they can live very isolated from the conditions of life. And so an exterior here said, Oh, that's an old person. And it's the destiny of all people who follow the course of things without dying early, that sooner or later, everyone, you also will become an old person like that. And he's shocked to hear that. He continues on his journey, and he sees a sick person. I don't remember how sick but probably pretty sick. He said, Who's that? That's a sick person. Sooner or later, everyone gets six as a chariot here. And the Buddha shocked by this, that this is the condition of human life. He didn't know that. And then he goes along further and he sees a dead person. And he's never seen a dead person before. I grew up in the suburbs and I didn't see a dead person a corpse until I went as 11 year old to Nepal. And our culture where I grew up in, kind of, I was very isolated, protected from those kinds of things, you know, you know, but there I remember seeing some people carrying a dead child on the stretcher, down to the river to have the cremation. So, you know, here he was 29. And for the first time he encountered death, and any same thing, what's that? He doesn't know. And the charioteer says that's a dead person. Sooner or later, everyone, including you will become a person like that, you'll be dead. So he's shocked by this. Watch this. And this moves him very deeply. Then he continues on his way, and then he sees a fourth sign. So sometimes called the four signs. The fourth sign This is he sees a renunciant someone who has dedicated himself to the spiritual or the contemplative life, the spiritual life. And this person appears very serene, very peaceful as a kind of happy glow and radiance about him. And the Buddha has never seen such a person before. Not only in palaces even isolated from sickness, old age and death, but he's been isolated from the kind of spiritual peace or well being that someone who practices can encounter can develop, cultivate. And he sees this for the first time. And he says, What's that? Who's that material to explain? So this is a renunciate. It's contemplative, somebody dedicated himself to spiritual life. And, and the Buddha was very inspired by this site, because, oh, maybe there's another way to live than living life in the palace. And he decides that he's going to confront and deal with the issues of Suffering that's represented by sickness, old age and death. And he decides he also is going to become renunciant. And find a reliable happiness, a reliable peace, that somehow is a is a balance or as a counter to the sufferings of life that we encounter. So he so that inspired him then he left the palace, and he started his spiritual journey. And this story also then you have a juxtaposition, various kinds of juxtaposition of the Buddha going off into what was supposed to be a pleasant excursion into the pleasure parks. And then seeing sickness, sickness, old age and death and finding other things are not as they seem, finding out that he had been protected from seeing some of the fundamental existential conditions where it's like to be a human being. But in seeing that he was motivated And then when he saw the renunciant, and saw the happiness that everyone seemed, he was that that motivation had a channel

to do something, to go in a certain direction for himself to engage in a spiritual life. So that this, this is a very important part of the mythological part of Buddhist tradition is this example of the Buddha, encountering the four signs, and then being motivated to engage in a spiritual life. There are plenty of people I think, who have encountered some degree of sickness or danger, death or some encounter like that, who, rather than being crushed by that, or discouraged by that or my way from that, I've really seen that in a very direct way and say, Oh, this will motivate me. This is motivating me. I think I'm gonna try to clarify the nature of human life. I'm going to try to get to the root to the heart of suffering human suffering, I mean, engage in the path to liberation and freedom, or I'm going to find some way of expressing my compassion and concern for the world. The that I see out there. So that's the myth. And now it's your turn to make it your own. Is there some way in your life that you have been protected or been isolated? or been ignorant or been in denial about some aspect of your life or the human condition? And at some point in your life, you woke up to that it came came into came into your life. You saw it. This is well, I didn't see before and now I see it was pleasant. It's not so pleasant after all. What is so promising? Isn't it doesn't really offer what it's what I thought it had to offer. Oh, there's something really good something going on here that I didn't realize about suffering or love or peace origin. So it can be a wide range of things, something you didn't know that you're protecting firmer ignorant of, at some point you woke up to or became clear of it came into your life very strongly. And then coming into your life? Did it motivate you? Did it change you? Or could it change you? Can you imagine now thinking about it, can you allow it to change you? And how would it change? How is it changed here? Is that myth of the Buddha? Something that speaks to you in your own experience of life? And can you identify something your life has been like that? Does that question clear enough? declarative? Yeah. Only people who have I see is nodding yes. So people should ask a different place and not clear enough. So what I like to ask you to do is for you to form little groups of four and have it and go around the group. And, and each of you should maybe take about a minute or two Perhaps, and just kind of talk about what comes up for you about this myth and how you can personalize how you can make it your own. I could use it interpret your own life and go around you have that conversation for a while together, each one talking and after you've gone around all four of you, you can talk about whatever way you want further. And then, after a few minutes, I'll ring a bell. And then I'll give you another question for your group to look at around this, this this topic. Now some of you this is the last thing you want to do is to come to a meditation group and be quiet and meditate and then have to talk to someone. And I can appreciate that some of you are shy or something. And it's pretty common for people to come in here. This point this we're doing is want to bolt them out of here, and you're welcome to do that. It's okay. But it's also very common for people to come and tell me afterwards they didn't really want to want to stay they weren't looking forward to But they're really glad they did. That it really, you know, it was really helpful for them or important to do it. If you don't want to do it, and you want to stay, you're welcome to stay where you are and be quiet you can meditate. You know, you know, you can just be quiet and not participate, just, you know, the formidable group, and then just stay in. And then afterwards when we form we'll have some discussion. And you can listen to what that is like. So whatever you want to do is fine. But I really want to encourage you, it's really helpful. I think these discussions. So you willing, could you form little groups of four, and then have a look conversation each of you talk about for a minute or two, monitor yourself and then after a while,

give you more instruction. So I'm going to give some other instructions now. And I don't know if all the groups finished your conversation you feel finished or some people didn't go. If you didn't go around, you can continue to continue going around forgetting about the next question, if you want. But the next question is for you to discuss together and have some conversation around how not how as an individual, but how, as a member of a society or how a society or community of people might also stay ignorant or stay of something really important that's going on in the wider society or, you know, one of the one of the ways in which societies do this communities do this. Stay unaware ignorant, in denial, protected from encountering what's really going on. So you can thank your group, and then just reform as a big group here. So part of the teaching around the four signs seeing six This old age and death and then the renunciant is that seeing those things well can be a source of motivation. And motivation is one of the precious resources precious treasures of who we are. And to just that, that, to us our encounter with sickness, old age and death, or what that what those represents as a source of motivation. I know that one of the issues for a lot of people who live in urban life lay life working, having everything take care of family and many things is sometimes having energy with finding the time or the energy or the motivation to engage in their spiritual life in their meditative life path to liberation. And when people are tired and exhausted and doing a lot of things, it'd be hard to have the energy to be motivated to sit down To meditate in the evening or in the morning or different times or to engage in many different ways that people are engaged in a spiritual life. But it's it's said that a real needing really allowing yourself to see the nature of the human condition in some deep way and not being protected from it or isolated from it or, or avoiding it is one of the ways to arouse the motivation to overcome the limitations that maybe come with our lives so that we can find the energy to engage in practice. Does anyone want to have any comments? I made comments about what came up for you and I always like to have the discussion and the understandings and realizations that came and being part of the conversation.

Thank you. Oh my gosh.

This is my first time here. Um, and I don't I guess this is just funny. You know, I've listened to a great deal of the audio dharma. I was so excited about coming to hear Gil, talk.

And then he gets this little like,

Oh, wait, we need to talk to the

other people. Oh,

but I just wanted to say thank you, because I just,

you know, I learned so much from everyone in my little group. It was just amazing. And I got so much. I don't know more from that then

than listening to audio dharma.

Thank you. I know, this wasn't so much about what we talked about in the great thing anyway,

like, it's very nice. That's I appreciate that a lot. Because I think that sometimes he will focus a little bit too much on teachers. And we can learn a lot from each other in our own experience and some perhaps that would happen to you. Thank you.

It was nice to talk in our group and this isn't exactly what we talked about. But I always think about societies as having integrity. You know, like water has a surface tension, and there's kind of this, you know, we have this, like, need to fit in with everyone else. And sometimes it seems like everyone's kind of doing the same thing. It can be a good thing, you know, it keeps you from going crazy and, you know, going off the deep edge, but, but sometimes it's, you know, there, it's kind of holds us in doing the same thing more more than is healthy. Right? I always remember I think it was. I think it was maybe even Herb Kane who said in one of his columns, never underestimate the power of one person who, you know, believes in what he's doing, and he's doing the right thing. And I think he was talking about Gandhi, actually. And that was very inspiring to her. Here's this totally conventional columnist, you know, making making space to talk about Gandhi, and that was for the peace cranes, the thousand cranes After the atomic bombs

I had doubts whether I could get you to stop talking and ring the bell. And now anybody else want to offer anything?

I'm not as new as is you, but not that old either. But I just want to affirm what this means to have a place like this. My husband and I were driving 2025 minutes to get here and we thought this is kind of a solid some some wonderful word that it's that it's a solid center in our lives just to weekly and we're not we don't participate that much, but just the solid center people some we know But we feel like we know, we know who you are, you wouldn't be coming here, unless something was going on inside. So there's a real awareness and just a, a for affirmation that somehow we're supposed to, we're supposed to be really learning and what you may not know what it is,

at whatever age you are.

But it's, it's this is such an affirming, affirming thing for me, personally, and I think I think it is for everyone exists.

And I think it's very important for periodic they have a chance to meet other people in the community. Often when we come here, you know, there's sometimes a very low chance to do that people who don't come when we do on these rare events like this, they can come for many weeks and kind of not even meet anybody because so he's he's meditative group to come and go. So this kind of helps the community come together more also. So, I hope you're all well motivated. Don't stay up. Meditate too late tonight. Thank you