

2005-12-12 Death Penalty and Redemption

Thu, 7/16 10:10PM • 39:43

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

buddha, people, buddhist, tragedy, story, person, king, redemption, buddhism, compassion, heart, clemency, life, mala, jungle, kill, mistake, decided, interpretation, governor schwarzenegger

SPEAKERS

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Well, in thinking about what seems to be the upcoming execution of Tokyo Williams, I would like to tell you a story and Buddhist story. It's I've been told to read that it's the second most popular Buddhist story in Thailand, in Paragon countries. The most popular one is a story about the Buddha's life. Now he, you know, renounced his palace and went off and became homeless and how he became enlightened, that's told over and over again. But there's other story. The second most popular is also told over and over again in places like Thailand to have plays that they put on for the pageants and, you know, stories and paintings and it's quite quite, very popular, but it's almost never discussed here in the West. And the reason why I'm going to tell you the story is not exactly for the sake of the story, but for the sake of my interpretation of the story. So it is an interpretation, you're going to get the end. But it begs an interpretation. Maybe you'll have your own and the story is about a person, the prince, who was named D Sankara. And Miss Antara. As soon as he could do anything as a young baby young kid and boy seem to be precociously or obsessively generous and he just seems start to give things away. giving things away whatever you have you give to people and give and it really was remarkable how generous now Fili this young kid would give things away. And as he got older, he was known for his tremendous generosity. But he started giving away things which were not his own. And so I don't exactly remember the story. But I think there was a a elephant that was wasn't exactly the boiled elephant was the national elephant belong to the whole country, but the king was in charge of it and he gave away the Royal elephant. And the people got very upset about this because it wasn't his to giveaway belong to the whole country shouldn't give us away. And then you mentioned eventually he got married and had children and he continued as a prince to just give away things. And it became so such a problem for the people of that country, that eventually the king had to exile, his son, his son in his family. And he was sent into exile into beyond the borders of the country into goes to some other place. And there they went, they went beyond the borders of the country, and took up residence, deepened some jungle some forest, built a hut and lived there in the hut, kind of very simple lives living there. And this other person, I think maybe who's a Brahmin came heard about this the sentara who was so generous to a fault I mean that you seem to give everything away with free freely

perfected generosity just freely given and thought he would go there to where he was living with his wife and his two young children. And then Robin came and I think maybe had a sad story to tell and asked if he could please decent hours, wife and children and maybe a slaves or I'm not sure exactly how the story went, but he wanted them to be given to him. And v center gave his wife and children away to this brand Knock they went. Now when this story is often told, as I've been told, as I've read in different sources, in places like Thailand, people often cry. People are often quite upset by the story, it's very painful story to listen to. There's not you know, so it's a difficult story here. He's given us a what gives away his wife and his children. Well, it's kind of a fable, this story, because it turns out that the Brahman was really the god Brahma in disguise, the great God, the Zeus of the Pantheon, who had heard about this tremendous generosity of the center and want to come down and test it. And, and when he took the wife and children away, but then he brought him back and, you know, somehow reinstated him back in this country is Princeton. Instant became king and they all live happily ever after ever after, that has a happy ending in that way. But I think that ending is kind of not so interesting. And it's kind of like the kind of the fairy tale aspect, the story kind of kicked in. And sometimes the interpretation of it is that this is the perfection of generosity. That nerd in order to cultivate a very deep spiritual life in Buddhism, you have to perfect your generosity, and up to the point of even giving away this year, your children and your wife, your spouse. So that's kind of one traditional interpretation. My interpretation of the story is in order to be sentara to mature and actually perfect his spiritual life. For who he was not saying anybody has everybody to do it, he was he had to make a colossal mistake. Only with a colossal mistake, could he somehow discover a depth in his heart a depth of maybe humility, and a depth of compassion, which would allow him to perfect his spiritual life. And as the story is told, v sentara is the person who in his next lifetime, would become the Buddha. That lie in Buddhism we have all these lifetimes of practice and training to prepare a person to become a Buddha. And in the last lifetime before he became Buddha, according to my interpretation, he had to make a really big mistake. And somehow that mistake, cracked his heart to open his heart. It's something that gave birth to the kind of compassion that is required for someone To become a Buddha? Have you ever made mistakes? I'll be just a few of you right? And have you learned from them? Have you been humbled by it of yours as your years your understanding of others and the struggles of other people go through and the difficulties kind of been awakened by your own mistakes and on problems and difficulties you've had, as it work in your capacity for compassion, and caring of others, have made a mistake yourself a big mistake. So inherent in the Buddhist teachings of Buddhism, is the idea that people can change. And that's inherent because the whole enterprise of Buddhism is involved in one perspective, about bringing about change in the human heart. To bring about liberation, to bring about freedom to uproot, to the forces of greed, hate and delusion, to bring about the opposite of greed, hate and delusion to bring her up bring about certainly generosity of wisdom. And that Buddhism is based on the premise that it's possible to somehow transform ourselves in not just mild ways. Not just simple ways, but in very deeply rooted radical ways. Eat, radical transformation of our hearts or minds or consciousness of our identity. So another story that's fairly popular in Buddhism is a story of unruly Mala. And in I think it's an England maybe some of you know, in England, there's a network of Buddhists, Buddhist groups or Buddhist practitioners and then teachers and stuff Go there. But Buddhist groups are meditators, in the prison systems in England.

And this network I think it's there in England is called the uncle the Mala. They take that name from the character of this very famous Buddhist story. And unruly means finger like fingers in the hand. And mala is the kind of the rosary, the Buddhist rosary, its necklace. So, it's the necklace of fingers. And that was his nickname, because he was a mass murderer in the time of the Buddha. And from every one of his victims, he took a finger and he's strong adonus necklace, which then he went around with pretty gruesome. And these killed many people, the story goes and said tear in the hearts of the villagers and people and apparently he was setting out To produce to commit some particularly grievous murder, one story I've heard is that you know what can be more grievous than anybody else. But the story was was gonna kill this mother. And the Buddha heard when did this and he said, I'll go into the woods for uncle the malaise and somehow address him. People say, Oh, don't go in there, you know, because you'll kill you too. But the Buddha went into the woods. And Angulimala saw the Buddha coming. And he said, Oh, great. These are these you know, these monk types. They go undefended. They have no weapons. They can't find a lot to fight. This will be easy. So he set up set up, off after the Buddha add his finger to his collection. And as he was walking through the jungle, following the Buddha, the Buddha didn't various pace he just kept walking. Living quiet, dignified way down through the JUNGLE, JUNGLE and Angulimala no matter how fast you walk, ended up getting further and further away. We couldn't catch up to him. And so finally Angulimala yelled out, stop. And the Buddha continued walking, but he said the over shoulder he said, I stopped long ago. Why don't you and this court unbelieva less attention and, you know, kind of touched him in some way or did something to his mind that nothing else had ever done. And then he became the Buddha student. And the story is that what that mean understanding here is that when the Buddha said I, you know, he didn't would have stopped in physically stopped walking, he kept physically walking. But what he stopped, was he stopped the greed The hate and delusion, his own heart. And when he asked Angulimala Why don't you stop also, he was challenging him saying you can do this also, this is also a possibility for you. So Angulimala not only became the Buddhist student, but then became a Buddhist monk. Shortly thereafter, the king of the realm decided to do something about this mass murder. And so he gathered a very large army of in order to go into the jungle and we felt he was safe and went to the jungle and uprooting probably kill this uncle the Mala. And with his entourage, the king came into the into the forest and found the Buddha where the Buddha was camped and came up to the Buddha. Buddha was sitting there and he had an attended monk behind it, who was standing him it's probably very hot day. So who's being fanned and the Buddha and the king came up and pays respect to the Buddha and said We're here in the forest in order to find Angulimala. Have you seen him? And the Buddha didn't reply directly. But he said to the king, what would you do? If you found out that Angulimala had renounced his evil ways, and ad ordained as a monk, taking up the holy life. And the king said, Oh, in that case, I would bow to him. And then unbelievable. And the Buddha said, Well, this attendance behind me fanning me, this is Angulimala. And then the story goes that the Kings here stood up an end. But true to his where the king left Angulimala alone Angulimala went on to become an Iraq become fully enlightened. And what's interesting about this story is that later Angulimala goes into the village, some village where he apparently maybe killed some people. And he went as a monk for his arms. When people saw it, saw him there, they threw stones at him and he got hurt injured. He came back to the Buddha and said, Look, you know, look at me. And the Buddha said something like,

Well, what do you expect? You know, this is your karma. You know, you set something in motion and your karma is coming back to you. Even being enlightened doesn't for you necessarily from that karma. So here, you know, the birth stories, you know, talking Change possibility of change, inherently more or less possibility, from Buddhist point of view, the most radical change possible to liberation, someone who did such awful things. So the tendency in Buddhism is to believe or to see human nature in that capacity to see that human human beings can change. We have to see it that way, because otherwise there's no hope for us. And that can be radical change as possible. The friend of mine was involved in the anti war protests during the Vietnam War times. And she'd go to protests and demonstrations and she went to one at San Francisco State. And there was just police line, maybe a riot police law lined up, kind of blocking the demonstrators or doing something. And then there's a crowd of demonstrators up against the police line. And she was kind of somehow squeezed up between demonstrators behind her and up against one police officer. And they couldn't avoid each other they were they looked like they were, you know, there with each other and they look into each other's eyes. And she saw something in the police officers eyes that changed her life forever. And, and because of this, she eventually found Buddhist practice and became only a Buddhist practitioner, but eventually a Zen priest, and now senior Zen teacher at Zen center. But that was a pivotal moment in her life. Looking into for her I think the enemy's eyes in this police officer and in seeing something there in his eyes, They changed her. And I don't know what that is. I never asked her for the details. What did you see there? Maybe you can imagine what can you see another person's eyes when you really have to see them, because you stop seeing them as a police officer or the enemy, whatever projection that you might have for that poor person. But you really can see the person's humanity to see the person maybe not so different than you to have some kind of veil or some kind of sense of separation drop away and be right there. Kind of that kind of closeness. What is that like? So she was changed. We have no idea what the police officer but she was changed to what is it like when we kind of allow ourselves to look into someone's eyes. I know it's very easy for people not to want to do that. Turn away. We do it all the time, I think on the streets and the stores all kinds of situations. But to take the time to really stopped and really do something equivalent to really looking someone deep nice to see their humanity to see into the heart to see what who they really are. What happens to us then? Many years ago, I decided one of the things that contributed to me becoming a vegetarian when I did when I was 19, or 20 was I felt that in order to eat meat, I had to be at least willing to butcher my own animals. And I felt like I couldn't do that. Sit there look the cow in the eye and say, you know, bye bye. I just couldn't do it. It seemed right seems kind of hypocritical, then do you know if I couldn't kill to let someone else do it for me. So what is it to kind of look at someone and really take them in. So I was at Spirit rock today had a meeting of the great rock teachers. And the end of the meeting, there was a little dedication of merit for the meeting. And then someone also wanted to include dedication, a big part of the dead merit to Tokyo volumes. And as soon as someone said that, one of the other teachers said, there's certain kind of heaviness and also for the executioner, the person who probably tonight is going to do the injection. And when he said that, you know, it was a tremendous sense of compassion for the person who has to do this job, who's going to do this job better if they have to do this job. That from the Buddhist point of view, it's it's tremendously costly. For the person who has to do it do the execution, the karmic effects the effects on the heart and the mind if someone has to actually does this

So, you know, it's one of the worst things you can do to your own heart. And so their sense of compassion for that person concerned for that person. So generally, the Buddhist idea, I think, is to be against capital punishment, to allow for the possibility of some kind of change, because we believe we believe in change. So, how do you set the conditions for change? And something where you see that belief is also present in how the Governor Schwarzenegger has renamed the prison system in California to include the word rehabilitation as part of the name. What is it now, Corrections and Rehabilitation? And I think it's a big change, you know, recognize the possibility of rehabilitation is part of it. One of the first the person who was the first Buddhist king, king Ashoka had been a very bad King killed a lot of people in war. And then renounced war kind of lived pretty much humanitarian in a very compassionate life as a king, create hospitals and all kinds of wonderful things to care of animals. But from what I can learn, he did not abolish capital punishment. He still allowed for it in some cases. However, he did something which people writers about to say was very radical for his time. And that is, I guess executions didn't have appeal systems back then. You know, years and years of appeals and waiting. It was much quicker, but he would give the condemned three days in order to meditate in some Try to turn their life around. So when they died, that their karma was changed enough that they would have some good possibility for how they continued after their death, their rebirth. So that, you know, the offering a merit to the execution, but it's also there's offering a merit to that the other people involved somehow subterfuge network large number of people involved in the decision that somehow must be weighing on them some degree I imagine the jury that everybody judges and everyone involved, including the governor. And I thought was very interesting. What I heard on the radio but the governor statement I think one of the arguments Toki Williams as you know, well, you know, argument for giving him clemency clemency was because of living in redemption, he'd been redeemed. I say the backup little bit, so yeah, so. So it's very interesting that we have the system in California where the governor can offer clemency. And I think it's, you know, it probably is very, I think it's very interesting because it's the role of the courts to follow, I think, mostly the letter of the law and so to decide whether there's guilt or innocence, but guilt and innocence, and the law doesn't in and of itself, look at the human side of things so well. So the idea of redemption you know, once they want to guilt has been decided, you know, Don't the courts, you know, are going to decide whether someone's redeemed enough somehow be forgiven or be granted some kind of clemency. So there's this kind of clause is kind of opening in the system to allow for someone who is not part of the legal system to have some other criteria for understanding the situation. So it allows certainly possibility for someone to measure or look at is a person somehow, as a person somehow redeemed him or herself as a person have been changed as a person been transformed enough that what was decided before the judgment before somehow doesn't apply everything relevant or valid or needs to be relevant in different way. And so it kind of adds a kind of human developed human or human or human heart element. To this whole kind of legal system, he says, the hope that I hope it involves, I don't know if this is a logical connection, but in the old days, like in the Middle Ages, someone who was in trouble with law, if they can make it to the church, or to a monastery, and they'd be left there, and the king couldn't get in there and kill them or do what they have to do, but there was a refuge in the church and sacred land, like then they had to stay there for years, they couldn't leave because then they would, you know, say stay for a long time. But to have someplace where there's some refuge, some

alternative, some way of looking at an other kind of set of values, I think is I think is you know, really, really important. So, what is that other value? What is it other places when it How does it operate? What are the laws? What are the rules that govern that? How do we make AI work as a society? How do we acknowledge it and we look at it But you know, so then there's Governor Schwarzenegger had this must have been a tremendous mistake, you know, if I imagined myself in issues, you know, I'd be easy for me, I think because I don't have to look for redemption. I have a pretty strong view about capital punishment. So but then I wouldn't they wouldn't elect me so but the but you know, I think must have been very good with me very hard. I imagine it's a very hard position to be and he says he said something other very interesting today. Probably some of you heard it on the radio. He had to he was addressing this issue of redemption. And, and, if he's going to base his consideration of the matter, upon base or build it on what the courts have decided, and the courts have decided at Tokyo Williams was guilty. And there's lots of questions about whether he really was or not right. But anyway, if he's going to base at least least go along with the courts that far, then he had to look at what is redemption then given that he's assuming that he's guilty, and then torturing and said, Well, if he's guilty, then redemption has to take the form, that he feels remorse and guilt for the murders that happen. And without that feeling, that apology and that remorse, there is no real redemption. That's pretty interesting. I think it's actually, you know, in some ways, quite profound, that there has to be, you know, that turning in the heart has to be also. But then there's a question. Maybe he didn't do it. He says he didn't do it. So it's kind of like Is it a situation just a huge tragedy? He's being honest, I didn't do it. But Governor Schwarzenegger has, you know, can't make any other choice because he has to base his basis assumption on the fact that the courts are right. The verdict was right. So it's a tragedy. I don't think it's tragic number. What is the tragedy what happened a long time ago. It's a tragedy. What Toki Williams did in his in his youth, the tragedy what that's created. It's a tragedy for us in California. Now, the tragedy, at least in my mind, that there's an execution going to happen. It's a tragedy for me. So as I hopefully for all of you that it's state sponsored. Because in some ways, there's murders happening all the time. In but somehow I don't know how clean any of our hands are because it's kind of In our name. So what is that? And some people are, you know, probably delighting in that a few was really right. That's the case. And, but I hope that even people who feel that capital punishment, the punishment is right, we'll have a deep sense of the tragedy, the tragedies, all the networks of tragedies are going on. And that part of what we do is, hopefully as human beings and certainly as Buddhist practitioners, is that in looking deeply into the eyes of the other deeply into the situation, that we're willing to stay present for the sense of tragedy, and not flippantly or carelessly or fearfully turn away from the tragedy. I'm not going to deal with someone else's problem. Or to assign blame, just get angry. Anger sometimes as a way of avoiding Just sitting with a tragedy or rationalizing one of the one of the previous times California executed someone. Many years ago I gave a talk on like I felt like I couldn't do anything else but talk about that since it was so up but that evening before and it was a very powerful moment. We had a question answer session and there was discussions about a little bit about death penalty, and maybe some pros and cons went on in the discussion. And then a man who was here stood up and he said, You know, I in my life, I found myself on both sides of this question of being about the death penalty, because both my parents were murdered. But the person who murdered them and then received the death penalty was my brother. Imagine that. Where

are you then? tragedy? So are we always our brothers and sisters for ourselves for each other? So I think that one of the ideas in Buddhism my hope, is that when there's tragedy, that there's some willingness to sit in the middle of it. And I think that that willingness, I think, involves certain kind of spiritual strength. I quoted yesterday morning, Martin Luther King who said, I got to paraphrase it now but the measure of a person's character is not where they stand in times of comfort and ease, men A person's character is how, where they stand or how they stand in times of change and controversy. So they'll just sit there with a sense of tragedy. And what you know, I think that the witness that for example, and perhaps allow that, to be the seeds are the fuel for our compassion and for our motivation, and care. The sentara generous prince had to sit with his tragedy, his big mistake, and it transformed him in my interpretation, so that he'd become a Buddha. So collectively as a society do we do we Do we allow ourselves to receive and take in the pain not so that we are victims of it, but rather, so that in some way it strengthens us and matures us and allows us to respond to the world in the wisest, most compassionate way. So I've read in the paper that there's a variety of people, basically papers in two big camps with people who are standing vigil outside of San Quentin. There's people who are against death penalty, and the people who are for it. And I know that jack kornfield is right now he has his he has his his Monday night sitting group. And he's talking about this there now. And he's encouraging his group to go to San Quentin Tonight, he's going to go himself and the outside the gates. So there's people that keep up to papers talk about people for and people against. But I think there's also a place for a third category of people. And what we both this category can be both for it can be people are for it or against it, but people who are going to be there at the gates, just to be a witness, just to be there and take it in. So it's not something that we forget or ignore. don't really take in and experienced as a society. So taking in, you know, pain like this kind of tragedy in order to do that in a wise way. is useful in a spiritual way. I think we have to allow it to motivate us. If we're not motivated by the tragedy, then I don't think the tragedy has had an effect. So it's a motivator for us to change, we can all change. So the question is, how do you want to change? What kind of change would you like for your life? how you live your life? What kind of change would you like to have for your society that you live in? And what will you do for that? Do anything. One of my favorite stories, theistic stories, is the person who went to heaven and complained to God about the state of the world can be easy thing to do. Do and And the person who's after complaining about the terrible state of the world and suffering and holocausts and all these things, the person said to God, you should do something about it. And God said, I did do something about it. I made you think it's a very profound story. So it'd be motivated to do something. And it could be in the smallest ways. I like to believe that huge tragedies, like the four murders that have happened 25 years ago, that somehow Toki Williams is somehow connected to or the creation or the Crips that eat all these kinds of events. If you trace back the cause and effect and the cause and effect There was probably some very innocent and simple beginning. Someone was slighted. Someone was unkind to someone else. And then it grows and grows and festers and becomes really big. So in our lives today, you know, the people who are born in Redwood City today what are the small changes? What are the small ways in which we try to create a better city a better society, so that in 18 years and 20 years, 25 years, they don't become gang members. What is it what we need to do now think ahead. And I think it's a Buddhist view, this wonderful religion that's seemingly teaches us be here now. I think it's also very Buddhist to actually

have some vision In the future, and to realize some sense, then cause and effect network that reaches out into the future. And what we do now helps create that future. There's a wonderful book about Buddhist ethics that's titled for a future to be possible. So what what future do we want? So, I hope that that events like this, whether they if they can't be stopped, that as we take them in as Buddhist practitioners, that our hearts become compost, become a transformer that somehow transforms what we take in the pain we take in and through our motivations and our compassion. That the strength of the pain. It's kind of transformed and changed into a strength of practice and motivation for the betterment of all. Navy, that our practice and how we live with our hearts, supports and helps all beings become free. find peace and become liberated from all suffering. Thank you very much