

# 2006-09-11 Responding To 911

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

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When I was a college student, I went to college at UC Davis. And I studied agriculture, agronomy, the art and science of field crop management. If you wonder how I got here, and I took a lot of botany classes. And the first botany class I took introduction to botany. And I remember very well, some of the experiences of taking that class. Perhaps I was young and impressionable. And I remember having a lesson on the cycles of you know oxygen and carbon dioxide we breathe out Carbon dioxide. And in a sense, and then these plants, this sense breathing the carbon dioxide into oxygen. And then we breathe in, breathe out carbon dioxide. This is big cycle that goes on. And those are big diagrams on the board the cycles and how they worked. And then I left the classroom that day. And I went into the courtyard that they had right outside the box in the classroom. And Davis has a central area, they have a lot of wonderful trees, gold oaks and various things. And they walked out of the classroom and stood in the middle of courtyard and looks at the trees. And what occurred to me was that time was where do I stop and the trees begin? And I thought, well, you know, I can do fine without probably without one of my kidneys. One hi You know, all kinds of parts of my body that I cherish and identify with myself, I could do without, but I couldn't, I can't, I couldn't I can't do without those plants out there making oxygen that wouldn't last very long. And so, I needed those trees and cents more than needed some parts of my own self. In this kind of reflection that I had, I stood there looking at the trees in all and I felt kind of a sense of sacredness being there sitting there standing there, with the trees and this question the question of where do I end the trees begin was one that where I felt a certain kind of release, letting go my usual identity, usual sense of solid self. Some bounded sense of who I am, and felt some kind of unbounded sense of beingness or presence or openness, the where there was a kind of intimacy or kind of calm tingling with those trees there. And I stood there for a long time kind of just an all amazed. And many years later, you could ask, can I ask, you know, why is it that that sense of interconnectedness and interdependence lead to sense of all in sacredness? I can imagine perhaps that someone could have the same experience and, and could get angry at the whole cycles in the trees and that it's you know, that we're still confined by this kind of cycle. So dependent on the oxygen being produced, and if it wasn't for that, need that limitation nature's put on us. Then we can go

traveling through space, we can go into water, we could all kinds of things, but we're limited by this requirement of oxygen. So I can imagine maybe something getting angry at that address, you know, why don't you know how could that be? But I think that was led to a sense of this sort of no harmony. Thinking within that direction Exactly. I think what led to a sense of sacredness was a sense of release, that that gave that sense of letting go of a certain kind of boundedness of hard definition of this is who I am. And because that kind of hard bound, it's inefficient. This is who I am, I think comes with a sense of limitation. And that sense of releasing that limitation, feeling that openness, perhaps was what led to that sense of sacred. So where do I end? Where's reality begin is an interesting question. And then if we look at our social world, we have a similar phenomenon there. Where do you as a social being, and we're just other people begin? Where's that? Is there a sharp line between it? And you know, in some cultures, like some American cultures, a strong emphasis on individualism being myself and You know, in some ways, it doesn't make any sense to some absolutely being yourself. It doesn't it makes as much sense as to being yourself as it makes sense to, you know, speak your own language. You know, it's not gonna get very far if you're the only one who speaks that language. And there's an inter relatedness interdependence mutuality, who we are social beings in real life or psychological, social, that's very much in relationship to what happens around us and with other people. I saw in a one clear way when I was young, when I was living in Norway, I'm Norwegian originally and I come back to Norway was living with some friends and on their farm. And he friend one friend was Norwegian is kind of wife was, is American. And so when I was living for six months in this farm, I, we've mostly spoke English together. And I was very close to both of them, but the Norwegian men particular Really, you know, he was really dear friend, I really liked him a lot. We had good time together. But there was a huge difference between when he spoke English and when he spoke Norwegian. And I kind of liked him mostly spoke English. He had learned Norwegian in a somewhat upper class little bit of a Socratic kind of neighborhood in Oslo, and had a little bit of stiff way of being when you talk because certain way you don't just know there's a how we talk, but how he kind of his demeanor came with that language. And he learned his English on in hippie communes in America in the 60s. And that came with a different demeanor. And so, you know, which, who was the real one, you know, you know, like, you know, it wasn't that dramatic a difference, but it was different enough that I kind of had a different effective tone or feeling with him. So you Who was the real Eric? You know, was it it was speaking in a region or speaking English. Maybe some of you who are more or less fluent in different languages, maybe have a sense of how you pronounce have a different way of being different personality, depending on the language that you speak. Sometimes I notice people from other cultures and maybe this is politically correct to say maybe misperceived things. But for example, I've met people who, from Mexico, who grew up in Mexico, for New Mexico, but they had German parents, you know, completely German dramatic, but somehow they moved to Mexico and they were born there. And so the children were raised as Mexican. seems very purely Mexican. But when I look at their, their face there's something about their face, which is Mexican, something about The muscle musculature, the way that the roundness or something the face, that seems to be lacking certain germanus that I'm used to among Germans. So it's been a lot of time with. And, and what I suspect is that in Mexico, you speak German, Spanish differently speak German, different muscles, but more so there's different kinds of expressions that you make when you in their culture. And they

kind of get used to certain expressions that you make. And, and those get embedded into your physiology into your, you know, your muscles of your face. And so there's a different kind of way in which that shows itself. And so it's not just genes that make what you look but also kind of how the muscles get repeatedly used and all kinds of things like that. So where do you begin and where does culture where do you stop the Where's culture beginner what's that inter interface there. Another example if I may, like this is vegan, it for myself when I first started become a teacher, and Buddhist teacher, full time apprentice teacher starting off, one of the earliest things I did was I started teaching this group in 1990 in Palo Alto. And I was just like, you know, naive, innocent. You young teacher didn't know what I was getting into. And but one thing was really clear was that looking back now, I couldn't have stepped into the shoes, the teacher that I have now, then it was just too big a step to take. And just too daunting, you know, just this little guy. And, and so over the years, you know, every Monday night, I'd come and teach this Monday night group. And it was really clear to me that there was a mutual thing that was going on there, that that, in a sense, my teachings, my presence, my showing up was in some ways Hoping to create this group shaping the group and the group changed some degree over time. But also that I was being shaped by the group, my confidence in myself as a teacher, my sense of what it means to be a teacher was being shaped by the audience that I had. So there was a mutuality going on there, I could feel that over the years, that I was also being shaped by the group view still being shaped by you. Nothing wrong with that in itself, like I think, you know, it can be excessive, where you don't have a sense of yourself and just kind of completely a chameleon with the environment. But that wasn't happening. But I think there's something but I'm not fluid with environment and changing, adapting with the environment, these kind of stiff and hard. That's not healthy either. There's a mutuality going on. So where do I stop and where do you begin? Where do you start? Where do I begin? Where do how, you know, what's the overlay in overlap and mutuality? And how much do we allow for that? How much do we appreciate that and how much do we Just hold back from it. What do we hold? You know, if you have a very strong identity, this is who I am, then you don't allow yourself to be shaped in some way by others. But if you have no sense of yourself, then you're shaped in appropriate ways by your environment. So we were very much shaped by our environments, we've been much influenced by it, and allowing ourselves to be influenced by environment is certainly, I think, sometimes necessary. So this is leading up a little bit, to talking about 911. And then some people maybe came here hoping not to hear about that. But I could not talk about it. And the question is, how are we shaped? Are we influenced, of course mutuality between who we are as a being as a person and an event like 911. And I remember when 911 happened We had a community meeting right away, going Thursday, as soon as we could organize 100 people came and we had a whole process around it. So one of the things that I said, There maybe later on was, if you're not changed by 911, then you're doing a kind of violence to yourself, that when something, something of that magnitude happens in our consciousness, that we have to allow ourselves to be changed by it. And otherwise, you know, I think it's a kind of violence to kind of maybe shutting down or kind of hardening up or kind of resistance. So that so the question is, how do we how do we allow ourselves to change? How do we change? How are we changed by it? And how do we choose to be changed by something like that? So I feel that I was changed by 911. In many ways, and some of the things I do today, some of the things I put away Time and two are a direct response to my experience of 911 to

give you one example. So, some of you know that I also helped organize an organization called the Sufi center for Buddhist studies. And the idea was that when we started it was in the Bay Area, there was very little opportunities for foster students to do a little more in depth. What could we call scholarly study of Buddhism, discourses, history, philosophy. And there's a need there was a need to kind of do a different kind of study than we get from regular Dharma talks. So we want to organize this organization to invite teachers to do classes and stuff and I was relatively happy with it. But after 911, I felt certain kind of dissatisfaction. I wanted to do something more and I wanted to do something that responded more directly to the suffering or Our world in terms of the Sati center, that doing a class and emptiness doesn't respond directly. So I decided to I had a friend who was a Buddhist chaplain at a local hospital and says, Oh, interesting, interesting put on a class that introduces the world of Buddhist chaplaincy to people, people who want to get involved in chaplaincy work, and it's a way of meeting suffering. One friend of mine presented himself at Ground Zero in New York, right right after the tragedy and presented himself as a chaplain and I don't know why how he pulled that off with authority. No, he was never trained as a chaplain but he's a Buddhist teacher now but he wasn't really then. But so I don't know the full story behind this but but he's a wonderful man is a wonderful man and profound man deep spirituality and he showed up in the chocolate If there was credit during the cleanup time, you know, the first day and, and he was welcomed in and he would walk around and I can see the label chocolate and firefighters and people feeding debris and whatever investigators and stuff. Some of them felt a tremendous need to debrief to talk to someone like a chocolate and share what was going on. So he offered that service. So I knew about my friend who did this. And so I thought it'd be really nice for the Buddhist community to learn about someone doing this kind of work, maybe some people would be interested in that kind of work. And so with her help you actually organize the day event to this. And so many people came to that and so many people were so enthusiastic about this area, that within I think 16 months, I helped organize a year long training program introduction to Buddhist chaplaincy and the first year Anybody would show up. But the first year from like 24 people signed up for it. And now, this September, we're starting their fourth year of it. So it's something I've done every year. We do with you know, some 11 month program, I put a fair amount of time into it. And it's been very rewarding thing to do. And, but there's a fair amount of time. And sometimes I'm a little bit grumpy about the time it takes, because it takes more time than I wish, especially when not to read people's papers. Because where I papers is part of it. I got away from that when I left University, decided not to be a professor. But then I sign into our papers and don't have to read them. But which lovely, really lovely, lovely to see these people go out and work in hospitals and prisons. And one person goes along with police officers as a chaplain, right. If things it's lovely to see these good that people are doing it as an example. You know, I guess there was one response that I had that was taken a lot of time that comes direct with 911 hadn't had I wouldn't be doing this today I'd be doing other things. My, my involvement, my my engagement, my Buddhist teacher had a different Genesis. And, you know, also kind of pivotal moment like that sense. And it has a variety of things, but there's one pivotal moment, it was very powerful for me. And that was when, in fact, 1981 perhaps I was living when I was living in Tassajara, Zen monastery living there for some years. And I was living monastic life, there's a lot of meditation or retreat away from the world in many ways. And one day I came across a Newsweek magazine, there was maybe a week old, and I happened to open it up into

a feature article in the middle and there was an article about the Israeli bombing of the refugee camps in Beirut. And with graphic descriptions of it and all that as a child when I was about 11 I've been David and I grew up growing up, part of my growing up was in the Mediterranean coast and Italy. And I felt that you know, just just around the corner as they were with you where I grew up, and I felt that that bombing was happening, you know, to me or to my backyard, he wasn't he wasn't like, Vietnam was so far away, we're growing up. This felt like wow, it's here. And it had just kind of because of being in that environment to the monitoring being so open that just came in to me in a very deep way. And I felt a certain deep you know, maybe the word is intimacy with that experience, you know, that was going on in Beirut in the bombing and destruction and all that and it felt right to know about it didn't feel right that it was happening. But given that it was happening, it felt right to know about it, be witness to it, for that was important. And that was you know, And kind of my decision to try to live my life, in response to suffering of the world was very much partly that strongly born out of that moment of looking at those pictures and reading the article in Newsweek magazine. So maybe a little bit abstract and distant, but still felt that very closely. So to allow ourselves to be influenced by these events, we changed by it in some way. And not to do so perhaps, is violence and one of things I want people you know, after right after 911 was, you know, it's one thing to be moved and shook and shaken by this, that day, and that week and that month, but be very careful, you don't go back to life as usual. After something like that, if you go back to life completely, as usual, that never happened. And you kind of get reminded about it five years later and all that, you know, it's kind of moving but I don't know if that's really, you know, there's no, there's no ethical requirement. I think out there that says, Thou shalt be changed by this. But I wonder about our psyche or mind, whether it can take in the fullness of something like that, and allow itself not to be changed. And to kind of ignore it and go back to life as usual completely, as usual. I wonder if that's really appropriate for this mind. So how are we changed and I've seen people change many different ways by 911. And, and some of them I think, has not been so healthy, the way some people have been changed. I've seen people feel a much stronger sense of kinship with their fellow Americans, in some ways is quite appropriate to feel that to feel, you know, these people who are, you know, my tribe, my folks, you know, here in this land, you know, have suffered this tremendous tragedy. And, and so I've seen people kind of rally behind the flag and My country and me and all that. It some of that's appropriate to feel a kinship to others, but some of it also is an expense of closing down against outside the borders. And it's a kind of us versus them mentality. And so this question of, of boundaries of self and other and where you draw the lines is a very important aspect for any Buddhist life. And if the sacred is found, in part by lowering some of the boundaries we have and releasing some of the constrictions we have, then the question of, of where's where's the sacred if we can talk about it found in our relationship to something like 911. And I would like to suggest, that is one way to find it is by looking for inclusion rather than exclusion. So to find inclusion, and so certainly inclusion by the Americans who share this. Oh, that's wonderful. But then not like that if inclusion start at the boundaries United States, we feel the inclusion much broadly more broadly. And one of the things that one of the one of there's many ways of doing this, but one of the ways of looking at the inclusion is as horrible as 911 was. It puts Americans in the same camp as a lot of other people in this world. Lots of other people. I mean, it shouldn't surprise us that these things happen. I mean, this is what happens in the world. If you look through history. This is like, I don't wanna say it's normal.

There'll be terrible right to say that, but, but it's pretty common. So what's up about 3000 civilians died on 911 in America, firebomb Tokyo in one night and killed 100,000 people citizens during World War Two 100,000 citizens mcnemar Robert McNamara said that if America had lost the war to Japan, the Americans who had ordered the bombing of Japan Tokyo would have been tried for war crimes. But America won the war. So it is not for guilt that America would have put guilt here. That that's not the point here. But the point is that 911 we there's an opportunity there to to share kind of common humanity that many people live with every day. And I think that that makes us richer as human beings to feel that rather than closing down and or and coming from a fortress mentality, what is what is it like in a healthy way to open up entering And to find our commonality is that like the talk I was going to give tonight, which somehow didn't feel appropriate, but in some ways it is worse to talk about forgiveness with decided to feel kind of weird. But you know, it's also related to this. And one of the definitions of forgiveness. There's several definitions, but a very interesting one is to give up claim to your right to retribution. That's interesting how to give up claim to retribution. Some people say, you know, it's kind of, it's not right to forgive certain situations, don't deserve forgiveness or it's They're kind of a tragedy to forgive in some ways. But you know, forgiveness is only necessary if there is anger and resentment. And then you can turn the statement around and say, is it ever right to get angry and resentful? You can say is it ever right to forgive? Well, is it right to get angry? To do it right to get resent hold resentment or is right to hold the anger? And I opened as an open question, but I would suggest a Buddhist persuasion says that when you hold your anger and hold your resentment, you're imprisoning yourself. You're harming yourself. And that one of the very important reasons to practice forgiveness is to stop harming yourself with your own anger, there might be other ways of releasing anger. Besides forgiveness, letting go of it. So somebody might say, well, I'll do the other way. So go through the forgiveness work there. what's beautiful about forgiveness is that I've let go of my anger of some people and felt quite happy that old is gone. And then notice that my heart was incense. I say this, my heart was not close to that person anymore. But it was also not open. I don't know what that middle places was either closed or open, but it's not really that good. neutral. So forgiveness, in my definition, involves a willingness to open our hearts again, towards someone to include someone. There are two very famous Buddhist teachers, it's very different Buddhist cultures, who said that basically said the same thing. They said the secret of Buddhism is that nothing happens outside of Hearts. Don't let anything happen outside your hearts, nothing happens. Everything happens within your heart. So that's where it happens then what does it mean to close your heart? This is a beautiful, beautiful essay written by Time magazine writer. When Pope Paul the Second chose to forgive the man who shot and wounded him. To forgive is to be imprisoned or not to forgive is to be imprisoned by the past by old grievances that do not permit life to proceed with new business. Not to forgive is to yield oneself to another's control. If one does not forgive, then one is controlled by the others initiatives and is locked into a sequence of act and response of outrage and revenge tit for tat, escalating always. The present is endless. overwhelmed and devoured by the past. Forgiveness fees the forgiver can extract from the forgiver from someone else's nightmare. That's quite something. What is true of individuals is true of nations. One cannot forgive enough. The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attitude of the strong. Mahatma Gandhi said that and I think he knew something about forgiveness. And if anybody you know he's one of the people has a right to talk about it with forgiveness is

something of the strong if you will Maybe you can't forgive. Maybe the first task of forgiveness as an issue of interest is this look at your way where you're weak and become strong first. One of the aspects of forgiveness is not only forgiving the person, the person may be who's harmed you in some way or other and has to be done wisely. You can't be done while the person is still hurting you. Doesn't make sense. And it can't be done too easily. It's a sign of weakness to forgive too easily. But it isn't just simply letting go of resentment and the anger. But more deeply. Forgiveness is also letting go of the self image that maybe you had in the first place that allowed yourself to be victimized. To see yourself as a victim is their self image where you hold yourself. Organize your sense of self that setup to feel something so allow itself to be changed to allow ourselves to open the heart and to use the principle of inclusion rather than exclusion to allows us to be changed and ask the question, How can it be changed by this so that I can include others in my heart? What does that mean to be inclusive and to hold people in our hearts? What is it to reach out to others? What is it to learn about others to listen to others? So many times in my life I have been annoyed with someone or worse only to in the abstract not you know, kind of like thinking about them, I haven't seen them and then I see them we have a discussion about you know, whatever is going on. And I see their humanity and you know, talk to them and it just my my noise disappears. I can Hold it if I meet the person, and if I don't see them directly, and those go around my story, you know, I can carry my anger for a long time. So now sometimes when I get annoyed with people, I try to make it a point as quickly as I can. I can't just go talk to them, call them on the phone at least, because it just I find it very hard for me to maintain my noise to actually talk to them. So where's the inclusion? How do we open up again? And how do we become strong enough to do that? not do it as a weakness but some sense of strength. So the last thing I want to say about this is in the monastic Buddhist tradition, there is a ceremony that's done in October November, is done at the end of what's called the rainy season. And every year Buddhist monastics will spend three months during the rains, because in India they did during the rainy period and this is They're supposed to stay in one place, and not leave, kind of be on retreat, but just not travel around just being in one place. And because they're in one place, they're being supported by the local people that place to lay people in their place. So the end of that three month period, they do a ceremony called Varna, which literally means something like invitation to invitation ceremony. So and so the supporters of the monks are invited, and to the ceremony, and then they're invited to this is the invitation is offered to them. If anybody has seen heard or suspected, any action done by me against standard moral conduct, please tell me so I will amend it at once and recognize it. Isn't that great? We've been living together and know each other for three months, you know, I've been dependent on you. So now Please, this is your opportunity, please, you know, if I've done anything to offend anybody or somehow done something you think is inappropriate, please let me know. At the end of the two month retreat at spirit rock, people have been on retreats, two months, we do something similar to that. And usually the teacher sit up on stage like this, you know, hi, stage. I see. And everyone else is down there, you know. And, and we hold forth, you know, all our wisdom. And then it's the last day or so it's less about saying the last name in the closing. All the teachers get down off the stage and get on the floor and kneel down. And then they ask for forgiveness from the people who are at the retreat for any way, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The teachers have harmed anybody in their activity, not just teachers. And then we do three files. It's really moving, and I lead I lead that

ceremonies last 2133 at the end of it, I was the winner kind of let it and I could almost not speak the words, I was so moved by it, you know, so, and there are people in the room who are crying, you know? So asking for forgiveness. And so where this points to is a principle of always being willing to look at oneself? What is it that what's my search? What have I contributed? Where am I for wherever I somehow done something appropriate. There's a willingness to always ask and look something very healthy about that. Whenever I done and it's sometimes it's a fault that Buddhists they're too quick to look at their own responses contribution, but it's not terrible fault. But, but to have this tendency where it was my contribution was one of how much and to invite that scene where my fault as opposed to kind of pretending and perfect hope no one notices so how is it that you allow something like 911 to change you? What's your response in relationship to it? And I think that when something like that happens, response is required. And if you don't know I'm involved in choosing how to respond. My guess is that you respond anyway. But perhaps with forces inside of you that may be in a bigger picture, you'd rather not have anger, resentment, hostility, turning inward in the kind of closed way, rejecting, closing, closing the heart. What does it mean to open the heart in the context of that kind of tragedy? And it's important to question not only because of having, you know, needing to deeply respect 911 Tremendous tragedies pain it's caused in our culture. But it's also very important question because it's gonna happen again. It is happening again. It's happening right now in the world. What happened in in Lebanon last summer? You know, was that happened in someone's country, happened in their country and whatever happened in our country. So, do we just let those those people out there? So it will happen again. And my hope is that those of people anywhere anybody involved in mindfulness practice in Buddhist practice, will develop the wisdom, the skill, the capacity, to open to suffering when it happens, and not be victimized by it. Not by not be pulled down by it and depressed by it, but rather to be to be careful with word I used, but maybe the word is motivated by it. That there's energy but the energy gets born in that contact. Rather than feeling demoralized and de energized by it. There's a way in which of energizing, energizing, to make a difference to respond to be different in some way. And it could be, doesn't have to be different that you call out something dramatic. It might be that you decide to get to know your neighbors better. That can make a difference. You know, that's, that's your difference if you make if I know who my neighbors are, I don't know their names. Let's go knock on their doors and find out who they are invite them to key. That's good. I can make a difference, saving the world in small ways. So then I'll end with one story. Maybe There's a was a Buddhist American kind of teacher writer named Paul reps. He wrote a classic book called, since then 10 flesh and bones recall. Yes, interesting, beautiful book of stories and Zen stories. And in the late 1940s, early 1950s, I mean, it really was like the 50s. He wanted to go to Japan, and studies in there. However, as the story's told, it was very hard at that point to get a visa to go to Japan, for Americans, unless you were in some way or other involved in the war effort with Korea. America was involved in the Korean War. And somehow Japan was a staging ground for part of the war and, and so it was hard to get any kind of part of the war effort in some way or other to get the visa. So he went to the embassy to kind of get a visa to go to Japan. He had an application, and the guy said, No, you can't go because you're not part of the war effort. So Paul, Took the application back, flipped it over and then wrote on the back of the application. With this cup of tea, I stopped the war. He handed the application back to the Guyanese embassy, the embassy guy looked at it turns turn the application

over, right side up and stamped approved. So please be strong. Please find your strength. Be strong, so that in your strength, you can respond with wisdom and compassion. The world needs it. Thank you