

2007-04-09 Prince Vessantara

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good evening everyone. And the reason for sitting in the chair which is pretty unusual for me is that on Wednesday I had bilateral hernia surgery. So I live with sore and sitting in the chair helps. So pretty comfortable this way.

So the same thing I wanted to tell you a story and then with some vague idea that once I tell the story that will do something participatory where you have a chance to kind of somehow engage his story. We'll see, you know, as we go along with Nick sense. The story I want to tell you is in Theravada and Buddhist countries in the countries where Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, countries like that. This is the second most popular Buddhist story. And most people in the West don't know the story. We, people who know about Buddhism in the West will know the number one most popular story, which is your story having to do with the Buddha's life is enlightenment and things like that. And the second most popular story is one which is certainly a Buddhist story. It is a story of you know, in the traditional kind of idea there are many lifetimes that precious They were into becoming a Buddha. And so their past lives and stories about what this person who eventually became the Buddha stories of what his past lives were like. And this is a story of his penultimate life before he became a Buddha. So the last lifetime before he became a Buddha. And what I've read in studies of Theravada Buddhism is that when the story is told, which is told more kinds of ways, very popular story to recite, imagine villagers and people, all kinds of people gathered together at temples and use the full moon, it's, you know, candles, and they're all huddled together and very warm, friendly environment. And they're told this wonderful story, a wonderful, wonderful story that moves people very deeply. And in some ways, Treme troubles me deeply as well, even though it's a popular story. And it said that certain points in the story pinpoint, many people often crying, kind of very moved by it. So hearing this as the background as you hear the story, be slow to dismiss it as myth. be slow to dismiss it as being simplistic, because I think that somehow, for a whole population of Buddhists, it speaks to something very profound in their lives. And I would suggest maybe something a little bit troubling them some, some some difficulty in their lives, or some, some something it's you know, it's not necessarily kind of a, like a Buddhist enlightenment story. It's kind of like this wonderful progress, right, you know, as a good result, and this one has a good result as well and kind of table kind of way. But there's something troubling about this story as well. And it's a troubling aspect of the story, which perhaps points to something deeper In our humanity, some deep sense of what it means to be human being, trouble of being human being paradoxes, the existential difficulties, something perhaps. So, the story has to do with a prince named Vessantara. And Vessantara, so this is the last lifetime before we can get out he was born as a prince. And as soon as he was able to as a baby or young toddler or something, he was noticed that he had a tendency towards dana tendency towards giving things away and he would give his toys away, you know, whenever he could, he kind of gave away and this will this spiritual or this habit or this vise continued as

he grew up. And he kept used to giving things away his what his tendency was His disposition. And at some point, he started giving away things which were not his.

And the second precept says, Do not take what is not given. And perhaps we should add to it also don't give what is not. So he started, at some point as an adult, he was married, and had two children still have prints. The neighboring country had a drought and his country on the Royal white elephant, white elephants are quite symbolically important in that part of the world. And this white elephant somehow had the ability to produce rain, make Rain, rain producing elephants. So he heard about the neighboring country having a drought. So he gave the neighboring country his country's white elephant. It wasn't his to give away belong to the country. So the people The country by this time were quite upset, maybe quite upset with the history of how he behaved and all this generosity which maybe was a little bit, not so wise, perhaps, or something, but he given away something belongs and belongs to the country. And perhaps, you know, the people in this country who sometimes get blamed for using a resources that belong to the nation, not just to individuals. And so then he was the people insisted he had to be exiled. And so the king felt obligated and exiled his son, and so on, set off with his family and his two children in the chariot, to go beyond the boundaries, borders of the country. And the way they met someone who asked him for his chariot, and since he was into generosity, if someone asks you Sure, you can have it and so then his wife and children him continued on foot and They came to some other beyond the boundaries of the country and they came to some forest jungle area where they were able to build a very simple hut in the jungles, and then continue living there is a very simple life kind of build of kind of forest hermits or forest dwellers. And then there was a Brahmin. There's a story says, who learned about the centara and his generosity. And this Brahmin, I guess, was not a very good person. So he went to sentara.

And he asked him if he could have his children and be samsara said here. So this is when the story starts getting troubling, right. And, and then when his wife came back, he was he was off That particular day, maybe collecting mangoes or something. And when she came back, where's the children, explained that someone had asked for them, you know, his generosity and giving his children away to be of service to this or servants to this problem. And then I'm a little bit hazy in my mind exactly how the story goes. But I think it goes something like this that Brahma, who's the great Zeus of the Indian Pantheon, when someone does something exceptional, his throne heats up. And so his throne heated up, and so he went as to what's going on, so he went to check it out. And he saw that oh, this entire is giving away his children. This is quite something he's generosity knows no bounds. I'll go down and test them. And so the Brahman robot kind of transformed themselves from a God into And some person and went to the centroids said I would like to have your wife and peace entire says here at this point the story has kind of my mind kind of an unrealistic fairy tale kind of ending and the ending is that you know is the god Brahma is coming on the test isn't hard to see how far is he really going to go and when it receives I've been surprising Taurus even willing to give away his wife. Then he kind of passes the test. And so Brahma Who's this great God then kind of writes everything brings the children and the wife back. The family gets reunited from takes this entire and his family back to the original kingdom, where he gets received and eventually becomes King, a little bit halfway rafter. So that's kind of A strange ending for a strange story. make everything okay, right? So there are two primary interpretations of the story that I have. And maybe some of you have different one. The classic one is that in order to become a Buddha, Nordic and fully enlightened, a person has to perfect. The quality of generosity to bring one's generosity to the level of perfection. And so here he's done that is supposed to be an example of that. And so he's kind of managed to bring it to perfection. So he's ready in the next lifetime to become a Buddha. I find this interpretation very unsatisfying. Myself. Another one that's a little bit connected to that first, is that maybe it's all symbolic. It's not really his kids and his wife but in order to To become fully liberated and free, there has to be a letting go of that which is most precious to us. It was also

holding on to. And that could be our wife and kids. It could be all kinds of things. But not necessarily literally don't give them away to someone, your kids, right. But there's some kind of in order to become free. There's some way in which your heart has to become, not be clinging or bound in bondage, to your family, to your community, to your country, to your bank, account to your home, to your, you know, to yourself, even your self identity, your self image, to your hopes, to your fears, to your wounds, your hurts. And so something very deep that has to be let go of, and kind of beautiful and sensitive about letting giving it away. That's active generosity to yourself and to the world. That's deep, giving away something so I find that interpretation a little more satisfying, because I believe that's the case. And the famous kind of Zen, saying, if you meet the Buddha, kill him. I think he points to the idea that even something as sacred as the Buddhism is important for Buddhists as the Buddha, you can't even hold on to that. There has to be a complete letting go for the mind to be set free. So some people like to say that Buddhism is a self destructing religion. Because you know, you do it and the whole point of it is so you can get over it.

So it's like, oh, that even that. So now there's no other interpretation. And this is the one for me which has the most personal meaning and such Know how before you and it's I've never heard anybody else come up with this interpretation. So it's maybe a Socratic doesn't have a Buddhist stamp of approval. But this is that in order to become free in order to become enlightened Earth become spiritually mature and mature as a human being or have said hello tend to notice this way, in order to have the level of develop the level of compassion as necessary to attain full freedom like a Buddha. A person needs to make a really bad mistake.

And this is what the story is about. He made a really terrible choice. Did they just make a really wrong? You don't do this. You don't give away your children in your life. I mean those of us in a psychologically sophisticated west or at least in that post Freudian West and have a sense of the tremendous trauma that something like that could do to children and everyone involved and I think in the classic story there's entire doesn't just do with kind of, you know, casually he's troubled as well by what he's done. And as people in turn and listen to the story they're deeply troubled by the story it's very important story story for the for that for those people, but they're troublemakers. So what is it about making a big mistake? None of you of course admitting a mistake. So. But what is it about making a big mistake? Or what's the what can happen? Or how is it that a big mistake can give birth to compassion Or deepening compassion or bring compassion to maturity? That's the question. It's certainly possible to make a big mistake anyone's life and deny it. It's possible to justify it. It's possible to put up defenses. It's possible to blame other people for it. I read once, that when they did a survey of prisoners in California, California jails, they asked them simple question. Why are you in jail and the vast majority of them, blame someone else besides themselves. The lawyers, the judge the police. Now, maybe some maybe there's a good bit of the people in California jails who are innocent should be there. But my guess is it's not the vast majority. So this tendency of you know, playing someone else rather than looking What did I do? taking responsibility for oneself. So take responsibility for one's own actions is really to allow oneself to feel and sense and experience one's mistake to allow it somehow to, to really be felt in the heart to let the heartbroken maybe I've told the story a lot, but I like it so much to forgive me. There's a story of I guess it's a Jewish story of the yeshiva Jewish school where they had a sign on the wall in the classroom that said, in this school, we placed the teachings on the heart. And some students ask the teacher some point. Why do we bother you put the teachings on the heart? Why don't you Put it in the heart. And the teacher says, oh, only God can do that. We can only put them on your heart. And when the hearts break the teachings falling.

So you know, just to simply say that we should learn from your mistakes is too crass I think. But to allow ourselves to be transformed to really be feel deeply to take responsibility for what we've done, and not

to kind of get over it quickly. I love the very fond of what I know about 12 step program and the recovery program, the big book, I don't know so much about it. That's what I know. But I just think it's really really a wise system. And they're they really important really important part of that program is to make a moral inventory and people will spend, you know, a long time often any good writing often has to be done in the presence of someone else. It's one thing to start by yourself but it's one thing to kind of you know spend be alone Oh, I know I did this terrible thing you know, I really know that and then I'll do better in the future it's a whole different thing to go find someone and tell them somehow they the process of the heart of the mind goes through is very different if it's kind of told someone else so in probably the making moral inventories of this, you know, you go back and some people are quite surprised to go back over their lifetime. And realize, wow, I had no idea there was so much I no idea there was these patterns. So not take ownership or understanding or allow these things to kind of have their full impact on us. I think there's a way this approach which I think is approach of mindfulness as well. We allow ourselves to really be present fully for what our experience is, is one that has a lot of respect for the natural, maybe transformative process of the human heart. That the human heart is something that the human mind human psyche, some circles activity, human soul has its own laws or its own process, its own kind of way of moving towards freedom to, to release towards compassion to love. If it's given, it's given the chance, and to really stop and really fully experience and feel where life is allows for that inner process to unfold if we don't interfere with it. So to have a really big mistake, and then to really stop for it to be mindful everything They allow it to kind of, Don't be in a hurry to get over it or to be in a hurry to, to ignore it or to get on with life, but to a lot of natural process to kind of really take it in and allow some real careful attention to be given to the Theravada, monastic world. There are all these precepts, rules that monastics have to follow. And there's some of them are minor, some of them are pretty grave when they're broken. And depending on the severity of the, the rule that's broken. There are different ways in which a person comes back into harmony with themselves in the community. And some of them are not quick. Some of them require taking time to kind of beat you know, the kind of little bit kind of put on the edge of the community for a while, and sometimes letting other people know what you've done. One friend of mine who was a monk broke a rule. And he was required, I think, for a week or something to stand at the entrance of the monastery. And every time a monk who would didn't know the story came into the monastery, he has to tell his story. And of course, eventually, he was quite embarrassed. And it was time he realized this was really wise. And one of the things that happened was that a lot of these monks who came said, Oh, I did that much too. You know, and if people weren't a lot of the mostly they weren't judgmental, they would kind of go okay. That's how it is. And I think in recovery work as well, good processes, you share your moral inventory with someone. And sometimes it's the same things. Oh, yeah. Maybe first person is embarrassed or whatever shamed. Oh, yeah. It's like that for me too. So our shared humanity And I think it is important to know the story of use Antara. From this perspective, I think the big mistake I see as a great antidote to one of the

difficulties in Buddhist teachings and that is Buddhist teachings tends to focus on human perfection. The idea that becoming a Buddha becoming enlightened is moving to kind of a level of certain kind of human perfection, either perfect perfection of purification. And things are very different I believe from like, often Western theology or religion, but the idea of perfection is not really human perfection is not really the goal Exactly. But the idea of human perfection then that is an ideal. Sometimes it is very easy to overlook, or to dismiss the messiness of being a human being And the story is entire as I like interpreted your points, that kind of difficulties of being human being the messiness and the struggles. And of course, nowadays, we don't want to justify it. We don't want to kind of condone the mistakes we make. But is there some way of having some wide compassion care? certain kind of acceptance certain kind of? Oh, yes. That's That's how it is. I've done that to to judge people and all I was terrible person because of that. But rather, they come and tell you what they've done. They said, Oh, welcome to humanity. And then and then let's see, you know, I have tremendous respect for the power of

mindfulness. And the collective mindfulness of being honest and shared with people is very helpful. So what do you think? The story I've shared my interpretation Do you have any comments or your own interpretations? Or would you like to do here? Yes.

One of the things that's very odd to me about this story is that the Brahma Thank you said it was the Brahmin God comes down and fixes things. Which is very odd to me. Because, you know, in my mind when you when I have made mistakes, one of the

difficult but most helpful lessons is to develop the humility to live with it, and to make amends as best as possible.

Yes. And that's kind of what I was trying to live interpretations trying to say as well. So I mean, in a classic interpretation, The story it has makes some sense because the classic interpretation, he's being very virtuous. And he's being rewarded for his virtue to be me, I mean, everything that he reinstated, that's the logic. If, if the origins of the story, more like my interpretation, then the then perhaps the ending of the story is a cop out. Is there another or or, or another way? Is it the ending of the story, being stable like, is symbolic for the healing that can happen when you really kind of really present for your life in a full compassionate way. And some, perhaps, perhaps, you know, visions, his story of his entire himself is troubled what he had done. And so perhaps there's a way in which that being troubled and opening two that allowed for something deeper to happen within himself and some kind of heal Some kind of opening some kind of maturing. And then this this kind of symbolic end game was one is kind of mythic way or fable were saying, I guess when you do that there's a lot of it, then things come back into harmony.

That's my understanding my memory. It's been long a year since I read it, but my memory of the story is he's troubled. He's done. Yes.

Well, I guess you could say also, continuing on from your interpretation, that when he had

gotten back his family,

that then he did have something

to contend with concerning his decision. Because, after all, they weren't consulted. I mean, he took them as possessions that he was able to give away without respect for them as you know. Individuals entities, and also how it may have appeared that he didn't love them that he could just give them away that he didn't care enough for them and so on and so forth. All the things that, you know, he would then have to contend with in terms of confronting the fact that it was a mistake. If you look at the story in that regard, then

the lesson would be

would follow. I mean, isn't just now everything is okay, because the family is

back.

Anyway, that's a way of looking at it.

Yeah. So you know, it along those lines, he was given a second chance. And that second chance wasn't by simply ignoring what he'd done in the past, but that second chance was, was given to him to kind of try again to sense but with knowing what he'd done and somehow I would contend with that thing, and work with it, but his wife didn't just kind of kick him out of the house and say, forget you. Because he was given a second chance and then they'd be in that second chance then that kind of generosity, maybe it's her generosity. It's her generosity allowed him to come and Buddha.

Well, I mean, his perhaps whatever it is children are but children would certainly say, Well, why did you do that dad? Don't you like us?

Didn't or whatever, as any parent would know, or any

child would know we were all.

Yeah. Thank you.

It just, it seems to me to be about the sort of danger of having one perfection without the others. I mean, he obviously had the perfection of generosity without the perfection of wisdom. And it doesn't it sounds like it's a little unclear whether or not he gained the perfection of wisdom by making this big mistake, but if he did, then Then that's what seemed to me to be sort of powerful about the stories they all tend are really quite important to be imbalanced, in order to be actually

sort of fully awake. I think your your point as well is good. And then to add to that, in the Theravada, tradition, quality is not a perfection unless it's combined with compassion. And so perhaps he didn't know he was he is perfected, generally affected, but he taken generosity to the extreme, but he hadn't joined it with compassion. And perhaps it is in this lesson of compassion in I mean, I think many, many people probably find that their compassion for themselves and for others, takes a quantum leap after they've kind of been humbled or humiliated, or after they've kind of done something that really, you know, a big mistake. And, you know,

and I guess for me, because of the compassion aspect, I actually like the ending as a, just as a symbol of it's sort of like There is this sort of universal, totally selfless compassion. Even when no one no human being in the situation can really rise to the occasion. There's still the center line.

You say the,

you said that people

get trouble and then

then they are able to follow.

realize what he said few minutes ago. In our culture in Hinduism, this spirituality has been taken by many, many sensors we call them after they have really, really committed some big blunder. And even in today's world, you will see a lot of beginnings of the spirituality in many human beings. It starts when they make a big blender, or they

run into some big problem.

That Moral of the story makes a lot of sense to me. Thank you.

I won't ask for testimonials here.

Please. Thank you.

When you mention compassion a little earlier, it had to do with compassion that

it seemed to me that the first thing after your big boo boo and you see that you did it or not first thing but but someplace down the line is forgiveness of yourself and you can forgive somebody else for being a Bumble head or whatever. Until you've seen the same thing in yourself and forgiving yourself and even the root of the word forgiveness is dāna is fourth giving instead of singing to the fall you you give you give you give you without giving up the cleaning of that. And it made a lot of sense to do that. I was my daughter and I were talking today my chocolate and it wasn't a huge offense. But can you can you face and consciously go ahead Just a chocolate and then forgive yourself but learn why did you need to go get the chocolate? That's

not a very big one. What are they the logic of that seems a little bit dangerous you know you don't you know plan ahead but it's okay to do this because I

think there's a wonderful saying to the simplicity of it is the perfect is the enemy of the good.

I think I heard this story as a story of redemption. And I wondered if you were giving it around to Easter for a particular reason,

or maybe it occurred to me because it's around Easter But anyway,

the idea of

redemption and getting getting a second chance

It's very moving to me at that aspect that you mentioned, for the end in your version of the story seemed

profound in a way that you sort of

eliminate the, the shame of human experience by coming out around it and having other people's witness to it is another, another aspect of redemption that is not something that comes from above it is something that comes from sharing the way that we are human on this earth.

That's what came to me. Beautiful, thank you.

The other thing that's really troubling to me is that the story is about giving away life. And it starts out with giving away the life of an animal and then it changes to giving away the life, the life, the life to children, and then it switches to giving away the life of a woman. And

you know, it's it's kind of like this escalating.

escalating the stakes. Yeah.

And these lives are props

are just props for the story.

There's no telling of how these animals or other people dealt with this or felt about it. And I find that very odd.

It's Yeah,

yeah. It's like the story continues the idea of them just being props.

In personal. Yeah. So I mean, it's actually quite a long story or poem. So it's, it's a nice I told it it's like it goes on for hours. So, you know, maybe maybe it maybe there's more to it than I said, and I should go back and read the full blown story. But yeah, I agree. I agree with you. It's often the case that sometimes certain individuals both have stories, but also in real life. Are prompts that they're not really seen for who they are. You're stuck with who they are. Sad phenomena.

I'll say this.

I'll say this carefully. So it doesn't sound like condoning mistakes. But it occurred to me when we were talking about what benefit or things can come out of making mistakes, is that even in a mistake, there is something given because we give others the opportunity for forgiveness or for compassion toward us.

Okay, Be very careful, you're not making mistakes or to have that.

The other

thing that's really troubling to me, this is a very troubling.

The other thing that's very troubling for me is that there is no self doubt

in the story of self doubt by this Emperor, yeah. Yeah, that's a good legacy. I mean, my memory is that he's troubled himself for what he's done. So I don't think that's the I don't doubt but with the man himself, kind of, you know, feels the gravity of what he's done in the story.

I was wondering, when you were telling the story and in the reactions, if they're giving away was like a metaphor. for releasing clinging, and so, you know, did he literally give the children away and, and wipe away? Or did he just release clinging from them?

Or that's a that's one one way of interpreting your story is that there was a fable, and it's a myth. It's not to be taken vetterli but rather it's pointing to deep letting go that happens. You can still you can still, you know, have your car you know, keep it take care of it know that even though you've let go and you're clinging to it, you can still have your family but you know, when you let go that claiming to still have your, your money, you still cling to it. And, and that's one way of understanding our story. And you know, sometimes, I mean, sometimes in spiritual circles, they say things in extreme ways, in order to kind of,

you know, understand this stories being symbolic rather than literal Same with you're pointing to an extremely extreme way, pointing to that possibility of a very, very powerful or very significant movement of freedom of letting go, which is maybe counterintuitive to how we normally operate, which is foreign to have a normal rate because it's very frightening. It's quickly you know, there's normal society doesn't support it or doesn't even understand it and so, it can be very, very challenging and sometimes having a very powerful story or statement, like you know, kill the Buddha or something kind of kind of touch something deeper inside of us.

So, a sorry, for those of you who go home troubled It was not my intention to trouble any of you My hope, rather than troubling any of you was to actually, that story somehow would soften you. And soften some part of you that were you kind of willing to kind of have a soft opening, maybe acceptance or compassion or kindness or something to yourself, those parts of yourself there, there are those parts of yourself which trouble you, which you haven't really kind of dealt with or softening and opening acceptance in relation to other people. Rather than being judgmental to others. To realize the difficulty we all share difficulties we have, and to be willing to kind of hold other people in your in your kindness in a soft way, so you go home that trouble the other, the opposite, settled, open socket. I think it's the possibility of this practice to do that. Think with time mindfulness does that same thing.

So

that's what you get after surgery.