

2009-01-19 Martin Luther King

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning, everyone. Good morning. Well, we'll see how this goes. Good evening. And last week I started started this series of talks on Buddhist ethics. And as I was thinking about this evening's talk, I said, Oh, but how can I continue with my series with this momentous day that we have Martin Luther King and inauguration of Obama? And then I thought, well, the two of them are, you know, for me in my mind can be closely connected. And so,

begin with a story it's an ancient Buddhist story. I don't know if it really happened. But it said to have happened. Ananda was a monk, disciple of the Buddha. And he was wandering around the countryside. And he came to a village and he was thirsty. And you walked up to a woman who was sitting at the edge of a well, or getting water from a well, and asked her if she if he could have some water. And she said to him, oh, no, I can tell by your bearing that your your noble birth and the wealth for people like you is on the other side of the village. I'm an untouchable. And it would not be proper for you to receive water for me. And Ananda said in reply, She said, any water you took from my hands would surely be a defilement for you and bring bad karma to me as well. It is not so, sister said Ananda, just as water does not discriminate by whom it is drunk or used. So to should the heart not discriminate between people of different backgrounds races, customs and social stations. These are mere conventions of our own human creation. They are not the Dharma. Please let me have some water. As he said this, he held out a small coconut shell cup, and with trembling hands, the girl filled it with sparkling water and under then sat and slowly drank the cup dry. The girl looked on joyfully, wide eyed and with a racing heart, as if you're witnessing a miracle For in a way she was never in her life before. When around any people other than her family, had she ever been able to feel that she was just another person. The presence of untouchable hung in the air and cast a veil between her and the whole world. Now here was a holy men who in these few moments, had brushed that veil so easily aside. She saw that she was right and her heart was free from fear of any wrongdoing. This day or life that changed forever.

I was thinking today quite a bit about Martin Luther King this morning. My whole family my two kids and I, we went on YouTube. And we pulled up some of Martin Luther King's speeches and sat and watched it I Have a Dream speech and the things and I was thinking about him today and I realized that once I became an adult and went off to college, that the probably the three biggest influences on me in terms of spiritual life for my life in many ways, kind of setting the course of my life. Where was the Buddha? Big ways? Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King and many ways, those three people have shaped me in big ways and set the direction for my life. And that kind of struck me Today thinking about it, that

you know how much our own to owe to these people, and how in some ways, they also we're like people who showed me a cup of clear water and, and showed me a different way of being in the world.

Then I had grown up knowing the and I in reflecting on this today I thought about the so called American experience. I guess everyone who lives in America has the American experience, by definition. But there are some American experiences that many people share some shared more than others. And so there's the immigrant experience. And the for some people has been land of promise and some people have been the land of broken promises and are meant to suffering. And so I'm an immigrant. I'm an immigrant to this country. Most people don't realize that. And I remember coming here as I came back a few times, didn't get it right the first time. And but I remember coming here as a young child and being teased for my given name. My name is not Gil. There's an E in front of the Gil. And that's pronounced the egg and that name didn't work very well. It became eagle and everyone would laugh. So became Gil dropped the and maybe a small thing. They sent me to speech therapy class. So I would say, Mother and Father, instead of mother and father. And,

and Martin Luther King gave his speech 1963 when I was seven years old. And then within a few years when I was paying attention, he was shocked. And I was so much aware of all the conflict that existed in America at that time when I was growing up. And another part of the American experience for some people is the police and I've had When I was young, when I was in high school, for example, the police were to be feared. And I was afraid of the police and had you know, a good cause to be afraid and I would be pulled over for no cause at all. I know there's people who get pulled over for no seemingly no cause the causes, you know, they say, the causes driving black. People get pulled over American experience for some people. I remember being pulled over, up against the wall and searched for no reason as far as I could tell. Except that I was a hippie and maybe that's something you do out of choice. I remember driving, kind of as a as a hippie, it through cross country, to the southern parts of the country and the people that I fear the most were white people. And it was quite something to go through some states and, and find myself in situations where I thought my life was in danger. really intense feeling sometimes other people helped me get out of trouble.

You know something to be so that's an American experience for some people. When I was 17 I found myself driving through Oakland for the first time in my life. And then I was driving white and black men didn't think I was driving fast enough and randomly from behind. I didn't stop the Find out why he did it. I left quickly. I've been in states in this country. I was in Hawaii, I lived in Hawaii for a while. And it was quite something in Hawaii to take college classes where I was the only white person. People here in this country, many people, many people who are not white have experienced maybe being the only person, Asian person or black person. But you know why things were upside down that way. And that was the only white person it was quite something to sit there in a class and not actively showing that actually, there wasn't any hostility. Everyone was you know, nice. But, you know, it felt like there was this huge, huge separation huge. I was like an untouchable once felt like, and I knew it because it was time to divide up into little discussion groups. Guess who was left alone? Or sometimes I was left alone with the over the foreigners, the other foreigners, people from other countries who were there. So. So that was interesting to experience where to go to countries. You know, one of the things I've done growing up in my life I lived, I lived in many places, many countries around the world. So some of this American experience and some people have, it's really a human experience. Going to school in Italy, when I was 11 and being dismissed by the Catholic priest in school because I was not Catholic. quite something. Never I've never experienced religious kind of hostility before but I was kind of just really, really ugly. dismissal. And as soon as he found out that I was Lutheran, I didn't know what that meant, but I knew I had been baptized as a Lutheran. And

so I grew up in America was at war. I went to college. And at that time, probably some of you remember, there were enough college students in America who were being shot. Students in university I went to school, I burned down the bank. It was kind of very tense time I remember.

And war was really in the forefront because I was draftable. It was a draft Time. And so the question is, what would I do? So we would have these long intense conversations in college about war, about the draft, and we would do we got drafted the various things. And as it was, I was the kind of extreme pacifist in the group whenever we had this conversation so when you're the far end of the argument, you have to kind of defend yourself the most I guess. And so then I discovered the writings of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. And I was so deeply inspired by them. I felt like they they were showing me another way of being in the world kind of another way that didn't live didn't divisions of us versus them. But somehow found a way to keep the heart open.

Learn to read you

some of the words of Martin Luther King, he wrote or said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

civilization and violence are intense ethical, ethical and ethical and ethical concepts. negroes of the United States following the people of India, have demonstrated that non violence is not sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force, which makes for social transformation. Sooner or later all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace, and thereby transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative song of brotherhood, and sisterhood, I hope. I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious, audacious faith in the future of mankind. I refuse to accept the spasm as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the inhumanity of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching for the eternal othinus that Forever confronts him. I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life, unable to influence the unfolding events which surrounds him. I refuse to accept the idea that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war. That the bright day Daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.

The

Martin Luther King also said in the most difficult moments, we can match your capacity to inflict suffering. archippus acity to endure suffering. I'll tell you a story before I continue this on retreats, or somewhere like Association retreats. Many years ago, a woman came to me and told me her story of going down to the south during civil rights time to protest segregation. And she stood in a corner she said with another group of protesters holding a peaceful demonstration.

And some

she described them as rednecks came along and a pickup truck and they jumped out of the pickup truck and started beating up the protesters. And so they just sat there and let him beat up. The next day they returned, stood in the same corner and the same guys came by jumped out of the car and started beating them up again. The next day they went back on the same street corner That stood there again. And the same guys came by and jumped out of the pickup truck. And one of them, he said, had his standing over her, his hand in a fist ready to hit her. And he looked into her eyes. And then he said, What are you doing? And there was no more fighting and then they talked instead, somehow, three days, two days of letting yourself standing there non violently and letting that takes a lot. We can match your capacity to inflict suffering. With our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you, but we cannot in good conscious obey your unjust laws. However, we will soon wear you down with our capacity to suffer and in winning In our freedom, we will also appeal to your conscience, that we will win your freedom and the process. So that that when your

freedom in the process, the idea that we're all in it together the idea that we learn from each other, the idea that how we behave to each other is consequential. One of the things that Buddhism teaches is that our actions are consequential. That and to be responsible for what how we act, what we do. And kind of the set of kind of fundamental teaching of Buddhism is the teaching of karma. And the key aspect of karma is that our acts that our actions are consequential that no action is inconsequential. And so to take responsibility for our actions, and how we Live is a key part of Buddhism. How we choose to live is how the Buddha wanted to evaluate or define the person. The Buddha said that you are not defined by how you're born. You're defined by what you do. Martin Luther King said, You are not judged by the quality of your skin or the color of your skin, but by the quality of your character. So this emphasis on character, and character is not just something abstract that you keep tucked away, you know, in the privacy of your own home or something. character has to do with how we act what we how we live our lives. In the San Mateo County Courthouse, they have this written on the wall by George Washington Carver How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant of the weak and the strong, because someday in life, you will have been all of these.

So again, Martin Luther King, the ultimate measure of a person is not where he or she stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he or she stands at times of change and controversy.

Martin Luther King, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta Not be concerned with about what happens in Birmingham. injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again, can we afford to live with a narrow, provincial, outside agitator idea? Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

network of mutuality. So, you know, I read this these things when I was 2019 2021, Martin Luther King and Gandhi. And it gave me tremendous sense of purpose, a tremendous sense that to somehow try to respond to the world To the suffering that I saw around me, and in and as I tried to find a way to respond, I slowly gravitated to Buddhism to Buddhist practice. And there were a number of reasons for that. One reason was that as I considered my ability to respond to the issues of our times, the suffering, especially the time when people are, you know, not so far away, that I were being killed, standing up and protesting the war and things. I recognized that I was afraid. And I was afraid to put myself in danger. And I didn't feel good about being afraid. I felt like if I should live my values, I should, you know, should not be afraid. And so looking for some way to deal with that fear and And somehow in my young life, I followed my nose. And somehow I came to Buddhism. And because Buddhism offered a practice, and the practice is somehow would help me meet, deal with the fears that I had carried with me. So slowly then over the years, I next couple of years, I got kind of pulled into the world of Buddhist practice. And it was very meaningful for me to confront these parts of myself that I didn't feel so good about the places of limitations of fear, various things that I carried with me, and it was often quite difficult to sit there and meditate, facing myself being with myself doing doing doing all these things, but I felt it was really crucial to do this kind of work and At some point, after a few years of this, I felt it was time to bring it back, bring myself back, somehow back into society and kind of retreated from the world in those years. And I spent a lot of time considering how I was going to respond to a suffering, what was I going to do? And at some point, it became clear that what was right for me, and that was, I was going to try to support other people to do Buddhist practice. It wasn't so much that I was attracted to Buddhism per se. I was attracted Buddhism, but the Buddha Buddhism part wasn't that important. I just, that was the only thing I knew that I discovered that helped a human being, deal with some of the deepest forms of suffering deepest forms of clinging. Attachment, version hate that somehow is carried

in the heart. And to somehow be able to go down there and address those deepest places of attachment. I, for me was like the most crucial thing that I wanted to be involved in. And at the time, I didn't think of myself as being that I would be a teacher. Don't do this being a teacher, I had this idea that I would have the keys to meditation hall. And I would open up the hall and keep the bathroom clean and now the document, the vacuum the rug vacuumed, and make it possible for people to come and sit in practice. But I decided that somehow I wanted that nothing else would satisfy me unless I can somehow try to meet or respond to suffering in the world where I thought was at the heart of it and And so my word my life then kind of went into more fully than into the world of Buddhism. But that remains really sometimes that maybe it's invisible here, because wouldn't you, those of you who come regular time See, I'm quite capable of giving a Dharma talk giving a talk that goes on and on and on. About the maybe the details of meditation or introspection or something like that. And so it's not obvious that this is meant to address the ills of our society.

But in my mind, this inner work is really crucial. Because if people don't somehow deal with the barriers and boundaries and sufferings and hostilities that exists within ourselves, then I think it's very hard to be able to deal with it. Anyway. Else. So this is one like, I feel like this is like Buddhism offers kind of like this amazing medicine that I hope is available to anyone, anybody who wants that medicine. And really my hope is that people take the medicine, and then they turn around and they go out and, and somehow by who they are, is medicine for the world. The idea of making an army of contented, peaceful people who just sit at home is not my idea of being a successful Buddhist teacher. The, you know, I think that somehow being able to go out and respond to the world is really crucial. So I was watching these movies, these speeches and Martin Luther King this morning and then going through the YouTube kind of thing. Up jumped to a speech by Barack Obama. And it was kind of significant the date in which he gave it I felt. So he say that he was inaugural he was got the nomination for the Democratic ticket on the day that Martin Luther King gave. I had I Have a Dream speech and is being inaugurated the day after Martin Luther King Day. So this speech was given at Ebenezer church, so how you pronounce it. were marked where Martin Luther King was a pastor on January 21 2008, so almost a almost a year to a day before the election before the inauguration and I'm I was really inspired. And in one, like one of the contrasts I saw between Martin Luther King readings, which seemed to speeches give speeches side by side was and maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I don't know enough about the history of civil rights and all that. But I saw Martin Luther King giving this amazing speech, courageous speech, steps of Lincoln Memorial, surrounded by men. And speaking about man, and brotherhood, and he was a little bit before his time, before the time of feminism and in a place for women, perhaps. And then I saw and then his beautiful speech by Barack Obama, in Martin Luther King's church, and he talked about some of the details Some other separations that people have in our culture in our society today that people weren't speaking about so fully in 1963. So he talked about religious differences. He talked about gays and straight, he talks about people who are disabled, and abled, I guess. And, and men and women. And it was really I was really I was really inspired to see that and see the continuation, the develop into a mentum of this growth of our society and our culture and people who can stand up and speak so vocally and so powerfully about the need to be inclusive and to open our hearts to everyone. It is

It is certainly my hope that Buddhist practice meditation practice and mindfulness practice is offers a really profound contribution to this world that we live in, if I didn't believe it was I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing. And we wouldn't have here IMC the I hope. I hope that this is a place that everyone who wants to come practice feels welcomed. And if they don't, I hope they let us know.

Mahatma Gandhi wrote, to come to the heart of truth, when must be able to love the meanest creature as oneself and those are things Religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion really means.

So I certainly feel that I was changed. Just like the woman at the well was changed by an under. So I was changed by when I learned about Martin Luther King when I was a young man. And now I'm hoping that I'll be as much changed by our next president. I hope there I can allow myself to be changed, that I'm open to be changed and

And I'm struck by Barack Obama's call for volunteerism today. Oh, this is what I wanted to read. did not bring it down. got lost in all the papers. Oh, someone sent me a Christmas time, this beautiful quote by Gandhi that I can paraphrase it now.

You can shake you can shake the world

you The world can be shaken by gently. I wish I could remember all of it. Anyway, the point being that each individually, I believe that each person can be amazingly effective. And I think that the word hope that Obama keeps emphasizing is also hope that each of us can make a difference. And that no one should feel that they cannot make a difference. And I think this is also what the Buddha taught that each person actions is consequential. We can make we can make a difference. But it really depends not on sitting around waiting for it to happen. But it takes require some initiative on our part, as well. So I hope That tomorrow is a meaningful day for you. And enjoyable day was one of the things I'm most proud about America is the today's best holiday today. It's my favorite holiday in America. And so, I hope that I've done some, you know, some hope of an adequate job, celebrating it, commemorating it and wish you all well and I hope you allow yourself to digest tomorrow in your heart. Thank you