

2011-10-31 Hungry Ghosts

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SPEAKERS

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So the smarter smaller group than usual and Monday night is the mean everyone else's out trick or treating.

Now my first Buddhist tradition was zen, and in, in Japanese Buddhism, which is great from which then as part of there is a kind of a Halloween type festival called saganaki. Not sure I think, I think gaki means hungry ghosts. And I think the sad part of sakaki means to feed. The hungry ghosts are

this Buddhist idea in Buddhist cosmology, mythology that there are these You know, they say the classic understanding in Buddhism is that there's these different realms you can get reborn in if you get reborn over and over again. And one of the realms is called the realms of the hungry ghosts. And it just happens to be for us that were conventionally nominally born in the world of human beings. But if you're not careful, you will get reborn as a hungry ghost. Then, being born hungry ghosts is not as bad as being born in hell. There's also kind of Buddhist tales. But it's not so good to be born as angry ghosts. One of the reasons is that hungry ghosts have extremely big bellies, like huge and they are always empty, and they're always hungry. Always want me no food. Always looking, searching around for food to fill that belly and just kind of going around bugging people and trying to get the food. But another characteristic of hungry ghosts is they have extremely thin throats long and very, very thin strokes so thin, like thinner thinner than a straw. So it's it's impossible for them to eat and food fast enough to fill those hungry stomachs. So they're always craving food. They're always feeling empty, and always needing and wanting more and grabbing from more more. Mommy more. Some of you know kids can be like hungry ghosts. Can never give them enough candy. On Halloween. They're getting sick. Time to go to bed don't but I but you know they're turning green all the living room floor they've all this candy and local school here. I thought they were really wise a couple years ago but I thought it was going to be regular for regular occurrence. But the local school here, my son's school figured out not to have school in November 1.

Because there's no education happening November 1. They're just babysitting babysitting. Because you know the kids stay up late. They've over eaten sugar, you know. So hungry ghosts. And so in this in Japanese Buddhist tradition, then it's around this mid summer. Some of you know the obon festival. It's kind of hard. That they, they will do the ceremony to to feed the hungry ghosts. They're so hungry. And they temples in Japan, Buddhist temples, salt all kind of turn tells the inside out to have to do this big, big ceremonies that involve putting out food and praying and doing things to these hungry ghosts. supporting them, feeding them welcoming them. At the San Francisco Zen Center, which comes out of Japanese tradition, they decided to continue with this gucky Custom. But instead of doing it in midsummer, they do it on Halloween. And it's also used not only to feed the hungry ghosts, but it's also

used, especially Zen center, to feed or to support or to remember or to help let go of they say People who have loved ones who have died in recent times, so that there's one time of the year at the Zen center where which is for Halloween has this dual role to both to appease or to satisfy or to, or to make them feel safe, these hungry ghosts that come out, but also to help support and to remember those who have died recently, and sometimes in Buddhism. There's an idea that it's possible that your loved ones have been reborn as hungry ghosts. So one of the reasons why you want to do this hungry ghosts ceremony is to support and help them and feed them and stuff. But one of the reason I want to tell you this is that not just because it's kind of interesting, but but the there's one part of the ceremony at Samsung Zen center. I don't know if it's common in Japan. That that is a very touching to me. And they say it goes something like this. Welcome. Welcome all all that is partially known, unconscious and unknown. Welcome and be safe. I think that's beautiful. So once a year at least, we welcome all the demons and goblins and hungry ghosts. And we don't just welcome them but we welcome them and say come here and be safe. And then there's intensity. There's all this feeding that goes on, I mean, ritual feeding at the altar. And I think in recent years xencenter they do this ceremony all dressed up in costumes but this idea of Once a year welcoming the unknown the partially known the unconscious because for me the, you know, I don't relate much this idea of literally of hungry ghosts. Though I should be careful, right anyway,

Niels Bohr was a famous physicist and he had supposedly had a horseshoe above his door. And someone said to him, surely Professor Bohr, you're not superstitious. You don't believe in that stuff, do you? And he said, No, I don't believe in it. But I've been told it works even if you don't believe in it.

So I should be careful. He's hungry ghosts. But so but, but I take it as being symbolic of our own hungry ghosts. Her own demons and goblins. And there's plenty of them that many people have that get in the way that that often are repressed or ignored or denied or denied, or not really treated well. And at least there's that message here and this one day a week, one day a year, is to welcome the disowned parts of ourselves, to welcome the parts that we have pushed away and don't want to notice and don't want to, you know, would would rather not have and welcome it, and tell it, it's safe. It's safe to be here for now. And I think that that's also the spirit of Buddhist meditation anyway. Buddhist meditation I hope is the kind of meditation we do is one of the places in our lives. They're coming after me

They heard what I said.

So that one day so we're meditation is one place where we're not supposed to censor ourselves. And we're not supposed to push away or deny any part of ourselves, but to make ourselves safe for all of who we are to come forth. And, and to not be not be divided against ourselves. And one of the huge suffering that some people have is when they divided against themselves, and I've seen people go through amazing struggles, spiritual struggles, personal struggles, where they have one part of themselves, which they say I can't allow that to come forward forward. And they try to be the opposite, but that part that they are denying, will come out somehow anyway. And then they these two sides are at war with each other. So sometimes If people have strong desires that are considered unacceptable socially perhaps, and then they can't do that, you know, or they have certain fears or angers or resentments that society or their family says you can't express those. If you express your anger, you're going to be really bad I'm going to treat you really I'm going to push you away or I'm going to attack you or terrible things happen to people sometimes when growing up where you know if they express their anger or something, and so that part of themselves gets pushed down or get struggled or the internalize the oppression, internalize, internalize. The idea of this part of them is health is bad, but doesn't go away. And so the anger is there and it comes up in the anger hate part hates the good part. And the good part is at war with the anger part and, and there's no winning. When we're divided against

each other. There can't be any winning, because if one side wins than a part of who we are, loses. And, you know, part of us are as losers, there's no winning, right. And so meditation is a time to allow all of who we are to come forth. So it can be seen. So it can be held in a way that it feel safe and where there's not war anymore going on. So for many people, I think, this idea that sitting in mindfulness meditation is a place where you're supposed to allow whatever is bubbling up inside of you to appear freely, so you can see it and become free of it. Rather than dismiss it or push it away is some people's a very foreign idea. And for some people, it's a very refreshing idea, or very liberating idea because it's been so exhausting to keep things at bay, to push things away, or to deny to have this kind of war going on. Not that all of you and there's a lot of war going on amongst all of you here. But I think it's worth one day a year to reflect on what is it? What part of you? Would you rather not admit to? Is there a part of you that you kind of try to ignore or try to hide from other people tied to you from yourself is part of your part of yourself that you're afraid of that you're worried about? Or the part of you that's a hungry ghost. Where you can't get enough you're needing wanting more and more. In Buddhist circles, sometimes they say that, that

the hungry ghost syndrome arises when people feel that their safety their well being their happiness, is found outside of themselves and their family. Searching and wanting to hold on to something external, that's going to do it for them. And sometimes people will find something external that works for a while. But it's, you know, it's always going to be fragile. And I think part of us kind of knows the, the fragility of it. And so it doesn't not really satisfying. And so often there's a, you know, holding on tight or trying to get more finding more and getting more. And so the hungry ghost is this unsatisfied, empty place inside, it's always looking and searching. And when it's quite strong, that searching and wanting and desiring, it tends to put blinders on us. And those blinders again, which creates a split, that part of us one part of us that we're focused on getting and wanting that seems so important, and the other part that's left out, and sometimes what's left out is not the hungry ghosts or the demons or the goblins, but rather is the saints. If we use that dichotomy, that duality, which is what we're doing Right today and tomorrow, today's tomorrow's All Saints Day. And today is the Hallo in the evening before that Hello day, the sacred day. And so goblins and someone has let the goblins and ghosts out on Halloween and they'd run around like crazy. Their last chance before the All Saints Day when everybody said their best behavior I guess, maybe some of you who understand the myth better than I do. So sometimes what's discounted or ignored within people is there is what's beautiful and noble within them. And there's something so meditation, I as I like to think of it is a place to welcome all of who you are and make it feel safe. One of the questions I like to People, especially on retreat is made it's not uncommon for people on retreat this year to feel a lot of fear. Not everyone, but people will go through it sometimes. And it's a little bit of a paradox because retreats are some of the safest places on the planet to be put on, and people get afraid. And the reason they're often afraid is all the external distractions and concerns fall away. And they discover deep inside, there's maybe some deep seated, deep rooted, deeply embedded fear that they've been carrying around for a long time. And it starts to stand out by itself more strongly than ever before, because it's not being distracted from it. And so this very safe place people feel quite afraid. And one of one of the questions I'll ask people is, if they have any ideas about what they could do to make themselves feel safer while they're on the retreat would make it feel safe enough to Let this fear come forward. Because it has to come forth. And it's a little bit counterintuitive, because many people feel that you can't let the pay and the difficulty come forward. But how can you make it feel safe to come forward. And so people will usually come up with some kind of idea and we'll try to implement it's usually pretty simple. so that they could feel safer just letting it come and, and be seen. Sometimes people are really filled with anger. And not that it's common, but it can it can, it can happen sometimes it rage can bubble up, and something that's completely socially unacceptable. And if it's really strong, then sometimes I'll say, go into the woods. And, and, and there, when you're when you're in the privacy of being off in the woods, let it come forward, your rage and

your anger. And the idea is the idea being let it come forth and let it Be Seen, let it come forth and let it feel safe. Don't act on it. Don't act on the anger don't go out and beat someone up, don't go out in, but let it come forth. So it can be seen. It can force so that it can be held and, and, and feel safe. Because if what we're afraid of inside of ourselves that which we've separated from and pushed away from ourselves can come forth and feel safe and be seen. It can relax and have it relax is one of the most useful things you can do. Have the anger, relax, have the fear, relax, let it relax. Don't be so afraid of these difficult things. And then let it

and then you might discover something really beautiful. That's there. So one of the Buddhist tales that is a few Buddhist terms. I also want to tell you fables or stories. One is the story of the yaksha. yaksha is a is an Indian. I like to call it a troll. It's kind of a tree spirit. It's for our purpose. I said he's trolled senior notary exercise. And this one, it was an ugly, little runt of a of a troll. And he went up to visit the heavens of Brahma the great one of the great lords of heaven. And Brahma has a great palace with a great throne. But that day Brahma was off somewhere, doing what Brahma does elsewhere. And so this ugly little runt of a troll when he jumped up on Brahmas throne. Now no one should ever get on Brahmas throne except Brahma because mean, he's like a top of the hierarchy. And you don't sit on the throne of Brahma. So there are other gods, the minor gods in the court there and palace got angry and said, You can't sit up there, you have to get off. You know, that's terrible. And as they were telling him to get off and being angry with him, the yaksha got started to grow this troll start to grow. Now he started to grow, but he stuck grew and became stronger and stronger, and more and more beautiful, until he became huge and radiant and beautiful. So the other gods got kind of confused. So they went and found Brahma and said, Brahma, there's this problem back at the palace. There's this ugly little runt of a troll that sat on your throne and got bigger and bigger and bigger and beautiful and strong. And we don't know what to do. And so Brahma said, Oh, I know. So Brahma returned to his palace and he stood in front of his throne. And he said to him, I said to this troll, said, he bowed, and he said, It's nice to see you. Thank you for coming. I hope you're comfortable up there. And as he started speaking kindly to him and nicely to him, the troll started to shrink and shrink and smaller and smaller and smaller, until finally the troll, poof, vanished. So then Brahma got up in his throne. And then he explained to the other gods what was going on, he said, This troll was a anger eating troll. And the more you were angry, the more the bigger, more he got fed and the bigger he would get, but if you stop being angry, it had no more sustenance and he will just vanish, disappear, shrink away. So I like this story because our Do you have something comparable? Are there ways in which you're feeding Your demons with your anger? Or are you making certain things worse? I know that I have resisted parts of myself. And for me sometimes I've resisted my anger. I used to when I was younger Hope it really hope it was only when I was younger. I had kind of blinders on where I the self identity where I wasn't supposed to being angry person. And so with that kind of self identity, you know, then I didn't notice when I was angry, and sometimes people will say, Gil, are you angry? No. And so the, the but the very anger sometimes fed my frustration. And I could feel you know, it was kind of self feeding mechanism. Where the more angry I gotten didn't recognize it, the more feed my frustration how things were going in the morning. angry I would get them. It was kind of ugly sometimes. So. So by turning towards the demons and the goblins and the trolls, and making them feel safe and kind, and feel our kindness, something begins to relax, and it's not being fed. And sometimes things will fade and fall away. One of the things that can sometimes fall away is the way we're divided against ourselves. And so that sense of division or the fighting, begins to relax. And it's these different aspects of ourselves don't have to be at war with themselves, and so we can feel and be together and perhaps reconcile themselves.

The other story I wanted to tell you was the story of milarepa and famous story, and I don't remember exactly how it goes, but that doesn't matter because it's Halloween. Or maybe Every time these stories are told they're told a new anyway. But milarepa was this Tibetan saint is the baton practitioner for gold,

kind of an ascetic practitioner and he was living practicing in a cave. And he didn't know that somehow that cave was inhabited by fierce human eating demons. And so, one night, these bunch of these demons came out out of their depths of the cave, and it started approaching him darling and snarling, and licking their lips ready. And so he saw them coming. And so the first thing he thought of doing was to praise them, kind of, you know, flatter them and praise them. And he did that and some of them didn't return left him alone. And then but some of them kept advancing on him. And so then at some point they he said, Well try something else. So then he he took a fierce wrathful stance and snarled back and was angry and like, you know. And that's right and some of them apparently so some of them left but the biggest and meanest one of them kept advancing. And so got close enough for this big open mouth, big teeth. milarepa jumped in and lay down in his mouth. And with that the demon vanished. So that's a brave thing to do. So are the things that you're afraid of looking at afraid of dealing with afraid of turning towards conflicts conflicts in your life. truth telling the things that you'd rather not talk about with people rather than face in yourself. And what would it be like to turn towards it and throw yourself into its mouth and say, here I am. Let's just let's just really not run away anymore chase it away but really feel and be and be present for this thing. And so here we are in Halloween, which some people use to get dressed up as their that which is often not usually don't the persona they usually don't express in everyday life. But all of you came here instead of dressing up, unless you are dressed up and this is what it looks like. And so I wonder from you. What are some of the things that you're familiar with? Maybe no one wants to tell about themselves, but you've seen it in other people. What What is, you know? What part what did you What do you know what people deny and push away of themselves? Whether that whether that what are the shadows and the uncomfortable parts that people don't want to look at? I'll start by saying something about what I've seen in Buddhist circles. I don't think it's universal in all Buddhist circles, but in some better circles, including things like Kia and IMC, probably that certain values get emphasized. Like maybe being kind and gentle and peaceful and calm. equanimous enough to make you sick, sometimes And,

and in that kind of environment, then, you know, it's not really so it doesn't feel so comfortable to come in and be angry, you know, bitter, resentful, and grouchy. And so sometimes people walk, you know, won't show that side of themselves. And so it gets pushed to the side. And so it's then it said, when things get pushed to the side in a community or an individual like that, or not looked at or not given expression or somehow denied, it creates a shadow union idea of the shadow, that somehow it's there still operates a little bit in the shadow still operates unseen and festers or as a sore comes around in unhealthy ways. So that's one thing that sometimes we see is when family or community or a culture overemphasize one value, then the opposite value, sometimes gets short shrift, and that can cause problems. So what are some of the things that you've seen that people have trouble accepting, seeing in themselves? That they push away? Yes.

I've known many men who

are willing to cry. Men who are not men who are willing to cry. pretty sad. It seems said. No, it

seems said whatever the thing is,

oh, when things are said, Some men are not willing to cry. I've known I've known people who've said that they're growing up when they're a small kid, their father would sometimes hit them or yell at them or tell them you know, you know, real men don't cry, and so they would just kind of swallow it up. I was I knew someone who, who was told he couldn't cry growing up. And so he would always go into the bathroom or go someplace. And they made it very kind of private.

Wanting affection and eye contact and warm fuzzies from other people, but not wanting to admit that and then so then it becomes I need to be cool and on top of things and I'm the one who will be kind to you that I don't I don't want to show that that I really want and need your kindness.

Yeah so wanting affection or kindness and but feeling that okay to ask for it or even to show that you have the need or the desire for it.

Yeah, and that can it seems like can get

kinda kind of scary because we get Kind of hard and

looking as if we've got it all together.

When we really don't, Okay, thank you.

complete

failure.

So admitting failure is not okay. So we might fail, but we don't tell people that we failed. It's like when I was growing up, waves was kind of a joke in my family, but we still skiing. And so, at the end of the day, if someone asked, you know, if you fell, you say, oh, almost. You were supposed to say that you actually did fall. But they mean that's silly, right? But there's much more serious things. Yes, admitting failure. There's a beautiful story if I may have I think it's nice of Ruth Dennison. Ruth Dennison is the most senior be passionate teacher in America. She's, she's ancient people not sure how old she is, but maybe she's 90 or something. And some years ago, she was tending to her husband, her ex husband, he moved back and she took care of him at a retreat center. She hadn't. She had Alzheimer's and she would stay up all night caring for him and tending him and then she had a teaching to do up in Oregon. She's down in Southern California. And so she spent, you know, all this time taking care of him and then she jumped in her car and drove all the way up to Oregon. And that's Friday evening. She was supposed to give a public talk and a big gymnasium and she was exhausted and so She started giving a talk and she told the story. And then she could continue to talk. And they just told us told the same story again. And then she's told us to talk to her when they tell the same story again. And you know, people are looking at each other. You know what's going on is the old lady. She's losing it here. And at some point when she started tell the story again, a whole bunch of people started to get up to walk out. And as they're walking out, she said stop. You are seeing something really special. You are seeing one of the most senior Buddhist teachers in America fail. Everybody sat down. So admitting your failure in front of publicly for all those people. Thank you. Yes. I was just say, believing that if you can't say something nice, you shouldn't say anything at all, such to the point that you can't stand up for yourself. Hmm. Yeah. So how do you stand up for yourself and be how do you be honest and stand up for yourself even when it's uncomfortable for other people? Thank you.

I think sexuality as well, you know, like feeling sexual. lustful or like not you of course. No, no, not you know.

Using this opportunity Yeah.

Yeah, yeah.

But yeah, I think that can like I don't know that can reverse to shame, yes, we can be pretty negative. Yes, I agree. What am I one of my failures as a teacher is last time I gave a Dharma talk about practice and sexuality was something like 1995 and so that's a long time ago and so you people might people who have listened to come here a lot might think that you know, that there's there's no place for sexuality in Buddhism because you know, I better not admit it, there's talk about it because, you know, Gil never talks about it, so I must be wrong or I don't know what they think. So you know, it's about time I gave a talk on a topic but

I feel such strong insecurities about myself and my performance, my abilities, that I will keep people around me whom I've Believe make up for my shortcomings. But who off also have qualities that cause a lot of suffering. And because I imagined myself to be dependent on them, I continue to keep them close, and, therefore cause suffering for myself as well as the people around me.

And you can't really address the difficulties they have, as because you're afraid of disturbing the status quo.

I do address it. I'm addressing it this week, a big one. But the let the internal conflict and the level of internal suffering is huge.

I wish you well with it. Thank you.

Since Elaine told something of herself, likewise about, I just got back from a meditation retreat. And I found myself being very irritable and impatient. The idea came up when you had mentioned about people being super nice. And sometimes you know, you're in line or something, and someone, you know, they're there first, but you come up and they say, oh, why don't you go first? And the other guy says, Oh, no, no, please, you go first. And then you go first they stand there for you know, it seems like forever, you know, doing this, this silly dance and I just want to say something fall and say, just go which, you know, end up end up not feeling very, very, very much in the spirit of metta. It was it was helpful. One of the teachers said, though, when you're doing a lot of meta, it can bring up the dark side, too. Yes. So that that was that was helpful to have that reaffirm that I didn't chew anybody out or anything. Okay. Maybe some St. Luke's but my solution to that problem and I did retreat the same place many years ago, is I always made sure I was last to the meals when the lines were all gone.

Sometimes I could take extra amounts and nobody would be watching.

They always have this grubby little bit of granola there, they just want you to use as a condiment, you know, a couple tables. If I'm at the end of the line, I just take the whole thing and dump it in.

That way nobody sees about the hungry ghost cup cover all of them here today. Well read.

So, so please make a confession.

In the back there straight back in the corner.

Not to go over so well in a crowd of such young people. There is more abstract it's not practical yet but like that really wanting to be involved as my parents get old like they're people I visit but not necessarily someone I want to take care of. And same with my in laws. It's kind of how I feel and I realized that the

cultures and think that's so cool, but I don't know that's Yeah, so part of me doesn't want to do it and part of me feels bad for not wanting to do it we'll see what happens if and how they go

Yeah, it can be hard sometimes with family where you you you feel some obligation to create family in certain way but you don't actually want to and so then that's the kind of socially unacceptable because their family right, but you don't really want to how do you how do you deal with this sense of obligation and sense that you can't really admit? You know, you don't really want to care to do something happen sometimes. Or they're a little bit maybe a variation of that is the idea some people when someone dies, family person Eyes rather than feeling a lot of grief, some people feel relief. And then they feel guilty when they don't feel like they can, can share that it feels like it's bad, there must be there must be a bad person to feel, you know, that there's a whole slew of ways. So that gives you know that thank you for those who spoke. And my hope is that those of you who spoke may be encouraged as those of you didn't, to reflect a little bit on these things and think about yourself and, and to be willing to and it's not necessary to admit all of what's going on with you to others. But it is necessary if you want to practice this practice, to admit it to yourself. And, and look at it in a clear and serious way. And there's something very profound that happens when we create the inner safety for all of who we are. And we we allow our thoughts or feelings our beliefs, our memories, or whatever, to come up without criticizing them without attacking them without judging them without holding on to them without praising them without celebrating that we're not gonna do anything. But let it come forth and come up. And I've seen over and over again myself and many students that I've had, that there's a cut, there's a self healing process, there's a self I guess self healing is going best word or a movement towards wholeness or movement towards peace or a movement towards resolution that can happen on its own if we hold it in, not in safe awareness and awareness that safe and non violent, non critical, but bring it forth, let it come forward without acting on any of it, but let it just float in the field of our awareness because none thing is static. And if we can let let all the things that are difficult within us, come forth, and all the things which are beautiful that within us, then there's a self healing or settling or resolving process that we could never orchestrate for ourselves. And so, if we get out is almost like you would get, we learn how to get out of our own way. And if we keep the war going, or if we are pushing part of ourselves off or denying and ignoring, then we are shortchanging ourselves very profound and meaningful form of self healing or self resolving that our hearts are capable of. And one of the things that has been very important for me, in my practice is the degree to which I've learned I can trust the mindfulness practice, I can trust the heart. I can trust all this if I've learned how to hold everything freely and openly in my heart and awareness. Here we are on Halloween. So we're reminded that sometimes it's good to turn towards or intentionally call for that which we are reflect on, what is it that we're ignoring? What is it we've pushed away? What are our demons that we haven't really given enough time, time for? And perhaps you also can jump into its mouth.

So you might say something, yes.

The multiple uses of different kinds of art therapy, which I could create for myself to help bring put in put on paper or something, or in a sandbox or whatever. Something I want to look at, but now I can destroy it later before anybody else and I can be still safe. Beautiful. Yeah, I will have looked at it. That's beautiful. Yes, art therapy is a great thing to do to bring forth. So be safe. Be all of you be safe. Thank you.