

2011-11-12 Encountering The Heavenly Messengers

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SPEAKERS

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I'd like to start this talk with a story. And religions as a whole are storytelling institutions. And many times, it's the stories around the center of religions which are sometimes much more important than the actual beliefs sometimes. So I'll tell two stories, Buddhist stories and one a modern one and then the ancient version of it. So the story has to do with this special monastery where the novice the do monks and nuns had been there by now for about a year and after a year in the monastery, when you're new to the monastery. The novelty a bit wears off and what you've got behind Kind of dawns on you and what it's all about kind of dawns and it's pretty common for the monks and nuns to get restless or bored. And just sit there and this was beginning to happen. The Abbess announced that he was going to take all the novices, the new and new monks and nuns on a pilgrimage to the holy sites of Buddhism. So they were pretty excited. They knew about the holy sites, places within India, where people still go to India to pilgrimage, to go visit the places where the Buddha was born, where he was enlightened, where he first taught where he died. So they're pretty jazzed by this opportunity. So they packed their stuff and got all ready to go and they had Miss met them in the courtyard. Okay, we're setting out and she sits took them out. They went out the gate, onto the bus that was going to take somewhere they thought the airport and the bus took them to a local hospital where they visited all kinds of people who were sick, very sick. And some of these young monks and nuns had never really been around sick people before, made quite an impression. And then they got on the bus and they took them to an old age home. Some of them had never seen really old people before. And they saw these people, although rather ages are the ravages of old age and what can happen. And then they got in the bus and they went to a hospice where they saw people who are dying and people who had dead recently dead and some of these young monks and nuns had never seen anyone who was dying or who was dead. Then they got in the bus and the bus took them back to the monitor. Siri and the first thing that you do what they went to the monastery infirmary, where they saw a sick monk who had a smile on his face. And then they went to this wing for the monastery where the old retired monks and nuns lived and Miss are really old nun. really old bent over hobbling around, no teeth, hardly any hair. And she just radiated this amazing love. And then they went to see this old old monk who was dying. He couldn't speak he couldn't do much at all. He's just seemed like only days away before he was going to die. And through his eyes through radiated this profound peace that lingered in the room that affected the monks and nuns in a way that you know, really affected them for days. And then the Abbess took them all into the meditation hall, like here at IMC and said to them, now, you have visited the holy sites of Buddhism. If you could come to terms with sickness, old age and death, then they too, will be places of joy, of love of peace, that you can transmit to the world around you. So the idea that sickness, old age and death are not only bad news, but they're actually powerful teachers is conveyed in a Buddhist, more ancient Buddhist story of what's called the heavenly messengers. And this is also a story it's a myth.

It's attributed to the Buddha, the story of how the Buddha left the palace and became a monk set out in a spiritual quest. And I feel pretty safe calling it a myth. So we don't get caught up in the literal aspects of it. Because the first time it appeared associated with the Buddha was some five 600 years after he died. The early records don't have any connection with him that you know, this actually happening. And when these later, records started talking about it, writing about it, some of it was pretty mythic in nature, in the way a lot of over the top examples of things but so this the myth of the story that's very important in Buddhism, this myth, as a story as teaching is that the Buddha was living in a phenomenally in a palace, many palaces, three palaces to the three different seasons. And his father had been torn when he was when the Buddha was born that that he had this sign that two possible careers as an adult, he could either become a great monarch, great ruler, or he could become a great spiritual teacher. And his father, being a monarch himself wanted the son to take over the family business and continue. So he did all he could to protect his son from being motivated to leave and become a spiritual person, a religious seeker and he tried to provide him with all the luxuries of royalty of wealth. So he just loved that life. You know, comfortable, nice, happy, all the opportunities of pleasure and delight, then education, everything and he made it so his son Never had to see anybody who was old, sick or dead. And not some anew. So unlike what some people are some people live in American suburbs. I know growing up, I didn't see anybody who I am only if I saw someone who was dead was when I was 11 years old, we were terrorists in Nepal. And I saw them carrying all wrapped up advantages as like a to something a child on a on a stretcher carrying her down to the river to be burnt. Otherwise, I didn't see anything, you know, of, certainly of death and much of real sickness. So I think it's pretty easy to be protected from these things. And so at some point the Buddha married A child and was kind of maybe a little bit restless. And so he arranged somehow to go out into the town off hours. And when his father couldn't kind of sweep away sickness, old age and death, and there he saw, for the first time, an old person. And he was with his charioteer, he said, What's that? So he was pretty protected if he said, What's that? And he said, right, sissy, that's an old person. And it's the nature of all people to get old. And then he said, Today, we went some further and they saw a sick, old person that is a sick person, same thing. What's that? The nature of all people, sooner or later they get sick. And then so a dead person, then Buddha said, would have to be said, What's that? And the charioteer said, that's a dead person. It's a nature of all people to eventually die. This made a huge impact on the Buddha. And in this story, there was a fourth messenger. And the fourth messenger was as he was out in about town, he saw a renunciant he saw a wandering ascetic wondering. You know, back in, in ancient India, there weren't a lot of options for if you're really seriously interested in spiritual life, meditation life, path of liberation, whatever you want to call it.

You know, there wasn't like the local IMC down the street or, you know, there wasn't the there wasn't the internet for audio, Dharma. There wasn't even bookstores for books. And so the idea of kind of like, finding opportunities was not so easy. And for people who really wanted to follow it seriously, I mean, you couldn't go off on retreat. You couldn't go to spirit rock, there were no retreat centers. And so, you know, back then society requires something very different than what's a vailable now, and the primary thing was you would go off and become a renunciant and wandering around. So the Buddha to be saw this renunciant and what struck me about this this person was how, how much peace there was person radiated peace and that got his attention that there was another way. So then there's the myth goes he went back home to his palace, and maybe celebrating the birth of his child or something. Who knows why there was an arrangement for a huge party. Huge.

You No, no, no. No

expenses bars party. So there was all This every possible entertainment and food. And it was, you know, him being a young man. They were also provided with all kinds of wonderful sensual entertainment of luscious dancing girls and musicians doing their stuff and you know, some of you have been to wild parties. Maybe I went to one It wasn't that wild. But I went to I went to Zen hospice benefit on Thursday night. All these people wearing black suits and blacks, you know, it was quite something I don't go to these things was kind of new for me and but what struck me by people with 100 people or 50 people was talking this cocktail hour talking and all that. But what struck me was how many people were drinking wine. And that was kind of new for me. I'm not around people that way. So it was for me it was a wild party. It felt kind of odd. People come up talking to me who some there are a couple people I said, Well, I thought, Wait a minute, this person you know, I think this person is drunk. seemed odd to me. So. So then. So you know, this is that was Zen hospice benefit, right? I mean, I can imagine the Buddha on his over the top party. And so, so, in the early morning, he woke up or he was still awake, and he looked around the room to see what was left over and a lot of people out of the people hadn't left then dancing girls and dancing musicians were just all kind of laying they fall asleep in all kinds of states of disarray and snoring mouth open from the smelling of elk Hall, puke on the floor. You know, there's all kinds of ways parties can end up. And he just seen sickness, old age and death. Quite a contrast where the contrast and he'd been protected from that for his whole life. These realities of sickness, old age and death. He hadn't lived a real life he lived a very protected life, life removed from real life because without sickness, old age and death, there's not really a life. He was separate from life apart from it removed, not connected. And some of you know that a life of sexual pursuits is wonderful and fun as it can be. It's not that deep either. It's also kind of you kind of removed from yourself in some way. So they say that at that point, the Buddha decided to work with the technical world. Buddhism is to leave home, to leave home or to renounce the world sometimes it said kind dramatic terms renounce the world. But look when he was renouncing and look what he was leaving. Some people are aghast How could he have done that? But look what he was leaving behind. He was leaving a life that was not tenable, wasn't wasn't really sustainable for him wasn't really life that was going to give him some deep meaning or deep connection or deep freedom or deep, anything that protected life there was separate. So when he left home, it was actually I think there's actually a choice to plunge into the world into life. He was leaving home, to face life to go into it. To space it more deep more deeply. Because given the life that he was living, he couldn't do it there. So So, I don't see the Buddha as leaving the world. When he left home, I saw him really as entering the world. Just as some of you perhaps, when you left home, when all of you left home at some point to the home you grew up in and you left that home to go into the world, go to college, go to work to your to your become independent in the world. So very important transition in people's lives, to go into the world that way. And he had to do it by release, big, nice, big, big separation. But he was already separated. And so he then went off into the spiritual pursuit, not towards freedom.

So there's some important aspects to the story. Again, the second story also points to how sickness old And death can be teachers for us. They're very important messengers the very important message that they have. But we have to kind of be willing to turn towards it and look at it and be with it. For that to be the case. There are plenty of people who recoil from those things and don't really look want to look at that. I know a man who's 82, who I've known for some time, and if I bring up anything to do with death and dying, he'll change the subject doesn't want to talk about it. It's like this is taboo topic. And because I guess probably it's far away, you know, 82 it's not something that he has to worry about yet. It seems very odd to me at that age, not to be willing to kind of look at it and consider it, even just for practical reasons. And

To the turn towards this stuff, to see what the message there where we can learn from it and not to be oppressed by it. But perhaps to see what we can learn from it. That is freeing, where we can learn from

it that is a door to you know, Buddhist parlance to freedom but door to love door to connection door to empathy or to understanding door to some kind of profound peace. And I think that's one of the messages of Buddhism is that it's possible to go through this life to to be in this life and be at peace. With all the challenges his life provides sickness, old age and death is just a shorthand for all the crisis is in difficulties and challenges that can be followed human being as they go through this life. health problems, work problems, health problems,

relational problems But how is it to find peace and all that? And do we want to find it? So part of that, you know, to turn towards is and also to look towards the fourth messenger, the Messenger of the monastic renunciation to represented peace or showed the Buddha, that peace was possible. Or the renunciant, to show the Buddha that the quest the search was possible, there is a way, there was another way besides that palace way. And so to take that seriously as well, and then to look and look, seriously, what is our relationship to the vagaries of life? What is it our relationship to these deep existential situation that we all live in? It's all part of our lives. How do we relate to it? How do we understand it? How does it motivate us? And certainly it motivates all of us, one way or the other consciously or unconsciously. Now, so far away from people's concerns, many times is concerned about how this is going to play out with sickness, old age and death when they get old when they get sick. Who's going to take care of me? Who's going to what's going to happen to me? And sort of took a look and really understand spend time with oneself, considering reflecting and talking to friends about this really trying to look deeply do more than just sit and meditate in the present moment. Because the only do that sit and be present just be present here for this experience here might not really allow you to explore and unpack what's really going on for you in relationship to sickness, old age that your existential situation of your life. So at this end hospice benefit, I had the wonderful experience of sitting next to an anesthesiologist And so I'm very interested in Hindu theologies, because, you know, I'm kind of a counselor for people, spiritual counselor for people as they're dying at times. And one of my big interest is how to help people be as conscious as they can as they go through, they're dying. And it was very much my mind because 10 days ago, a friend of mine died in Thailand, and pancreatic cancer. And so he was in a lot of pain. And so they put him in a lot of morphine. And his children were working very hard to try to fly from United States to Thailand in time to be seether dad before he died. And but he was heavily medicated. So it would have been so they managed to get there before he died. And I think he had some sense his kids were there, but he was so morphine that there wasn't much communication. And so I asked us in this as an issue geologists you know, couldn't they you know, I think they're a lot of the pain was in his stomach. Couldn't they given get have given him an epidural? And, you know, if if a woman can give birth consciously the system with a C section, being conscious of that for the epidural kit couldn't, you know, be conscious even for 10 minutes, you know with the epidural, like morphine. And so that's what I asked him kind of innocently. And he kind of looked at me with wide eyes and said, Oh, Gil, you're asking the cut the cutting edge question of my field. This is the thing with you know, it used to be we were so happy in our field to discover morphine. And it was such a such an important tool because people are dying with so much pain. And then we use We're so happy to have morphine and we just kind of use morphine all the time. But now we've been around long enough now we realize maybe there's another way also. And now can we figure out how to use the medication in ways that can alleviate the pain but keep people conscious in that process. So we didn't tell y'all the story was we were talking about this, and he was excited to meet someone who was interested in this. And, and so but then he said, you know, last week I recently said, I was talking to a friend of mine, a doctor. And we spent two, I spent two hours with him, trying to explain to him why this is important to do, why it's useful to do. And in a two hour conversation, he could not understand it. He was completely perplexed of why we want to use medicine to keep people conscious in their time or their life.

And that was kind of that was the amazing story for me was that someone who's probably pretty smart to doctor, you know, just couldn't get the value of that. And how much of that is just you know, it's a foreign world. So it's the unknown, or how much of it has to do with resistance to really turning look at these things. And I think that one of the things Buddhism has to offer is a willingness to look at these things be present for these things. So the story of the Buddha, meeting the sickness, age, old age and death is often interpreted being that motivated him to go out and search for his liberation. Perhaps there's no whole other way of responding to sickness or disease death when we see it in the world. And that is not to go into those practice to resolve these issues for ourselves, but to go into these issues, so that we can meet the people who are sick, the people, older people are dying people in crisis, so we can meet them as the fourth messenger. So we can meet them as someone who is at peace with these things. You know, one of the reasons I got interested in Buddhism, Buddhist Buddhist practice, Buddhism Buddhist practice, was that I was afraid of dying. And so I was looking about for something I was 21 years old, 20 years old. I was looking for something that would help me come to terms with that fear and such Now, I don't know if you know, I haven't been tested yet really, for myself. So we'll see we'll find out how it goes someday. But I, you know, I feel pretty comfortable spending time with someone who's dying. And I've had nurses tell me how meaningful it has been to, for me to be there are people like me and other Buddhist practitioners and stuff, because they're a little bit they're uncomfortable going into the room of someone who's dying. And to have people who are meditating people are peaceful, just being there is helps them feel more at ease or more peaceful or less frightened of encountering that. So part of the encounter with sickness, old age and death, and resolving it, working with it, finding our peace with it is not for our sake, or not only for our sake, but also for the sake of this world of ours that we live in. So that we become someone who can step into the world and hopefully make it difference they can make a difference for people. There's so much suffering in the world can we help can we support can we demonstrate? Can we be a kind of person that brings peace brings love brings kindness to the situation. And so one of the reasons to practice this religion, Buddhism practice practice that has this kind of strong PR thing about being a world renouncing legend, letting go. Being monastics sometimes it's like, you know, it's like, depresses like this is like a world denying religion. I don't think at all, I think it's the opposite. It's not exactly world affirming, but it's world entering is to be willing to enter into this world and to try to offer ourselves to offer Are the work we've done on ourselves as a way to make it easier for other people to walk through this life to follow away through life. And so it's in that context of some deep reflection and understanding and being challenged and receiving the message of the heavenly messengers is that we can sit and meditate and sit and meditate to drop below the party mind. There's probably been a lot of partying here today. Maybe not the usual kind of partying we think of but the minds have been caught up in all kinds of thoughts and concerns and restlessness and all kinds of things. But to drop below the kind of surface chatter of the mind the surface concerns of the mind and to find in ourselves, the depth, the depth of stillness, the depth of peace, the depth of love, that is only accessible when the surface Matter becomes quiet, when the surface desires of wanting and not wanting have quieted down. And so, to sit to meditate is to touch into the deeper wellsprings of peace of love. And so when we go into the world, that depth is there as a reference point for us.

And I know that in working with people who are sick or dying, that that's really one of the most, especially dying. Maybe people die in all kinds of ways. We don't over romanticize dying. But that's one of the most poignant powerful moments in people periods, phases of a person's life. So much of their life gets crystallized or comes to the surface and so much there's so much kind of things get concentrated in a certain way. Oftentimes and You know, if you've ever been around someone who's dying, like sometimes times used to stop, like, you know, all that surface chatter all the party mind kind of, you know, recedes in importance. I mean, just it's like, for many times, dying is the most alive people are. And so to, you know, be in there and be in that space and to do yourself, know how to drop the

piers you yourself know have have touched the wellsprings of stillness, a peace of love inside. And then to be available to resonate with someone or to meet someone else or to share that with someone in that space. is I think, very, very profound, beautiful thing to do. So, sickness, old age and death. I offered you to store two stories, a modern story and an ancient story. And there are other stories that can be told about sickness, old age and death. One day, it'll be your story. And someone can tell, because everyone has this story, one way or the other. So, it's certainly my hope that the challenges that exist in doing a day long write this like today, the challenges and the joys, the difficulties and the satisfactions of this kind of day are all part and parcel of grist for the mill all part and parcel of this. Trying to find a deep, wise beautiful way to enter into the world. Not to not to leave it really. So those are my thoughts for And I have a lot of appreciation for these people because all of you who come and do these day long retreats it's my my favorite things to do here at IMC because it's really a time for everyone to kind of engage in themselves and kind of be present in practice in a deep way. And, and, and it's, you know, it's I feel like this is where the real work begins with real, real, real work, but this is really, really significant work happens. And so I have a lot of appreciation for those of you are here today. And, and. And it's wonderful that we have a community that we can come together to use together as a group, because very few, very few of us would do this on a Saturday alone at home. I think having a support is really helpful. So thank you